

**African Immigrant and International Students: A Qualitative Study on the Socio-Cultural  
Adjustment of Students Into U.S. Universities**

by

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### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my loving and supportive parents, Abeba Zewdu and Girmay Mesele, who sacrificed everything to give my siblings and I a better life; my supportive siblings Merhawit, Jerusalem, Musie, and Afeworki, who stood by my side every step of the way and inspire me to be a better person.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Chair: Edward P. St. John & Phillip Bowman

Cross-cultural studies on acculturation span across multiple disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and higher education, and seek to explore the cultural adaptation of immigrant and international students. Existing literature informed a guiding conceptual framework for understanding how students adjust to the local culture, and has identified obstacles that hinder the successful navigation of the acculturation process. The present study examined gaps in existing higher education literature on the socio-cultural adjustment process of African immigrant and international students (migrant students). Going beyond past studies, this investigation addressed three questions: What is the role of heritage culture and social class in African migrant students' preparation for college in the United States (U.S.)? What barriers did African migrant students encounter as they navigate their way through American universities? Guided by a strengths-based perspective, how is heritage culture and access to capital associated with their navigation through and around those barriers in their adjustment process?

To address these three research questions, this qualitative study employed in-depth interviews to examine the socio-cultural adjustment of African immigrant and international students (n=28) enrolled at four-year colleges in the U.S. A grounded theory approach to data analysis revealed how African immigrant and international students' adjustment to the university environment was associated with both their background and university experiences. In terms of background, students' socio-economic status and heritage culture were key factors that influenced their preparation for college in the U.S. Furthermore, the study revealed the strengths

of students' backgrounds in fostering a sense of community cultural wealth, which helped to facilitate students' adjustment to their universities. Once African students entered college, they faced socio- cultural and academic barriers associated with: 1) cultural value differences; 2) experiences with racial/ethnic prejudice; and 3) and difficulty with the academic norms and expectations of U.S. universities. Additionally, students discussed access to cultural, academic, and social capital from four primary sources: extensive orientations, racially/culturally similar groups, faculty, and academic support programs/services. These cultural and university-based resources helped to mitigate the negative impact of stressful barriers, and supported students' socio-cultural adjustment. Going beyond existing cross-cultural literature, findings informed the development of a new strengths-based conceptual model of cultural adjustment and resilience. This model provides a more comprehensive framework to understanding the socio-cultural adaptation process of African migrant and international students in higher education with important implications for multicultural diversity research, practice, and policy.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The number of foreign-born students studying in the United States has steadily increased, with the overall number of international students in the U.S growing 72% in 15 years, from 514,723 in 1999-2000 to 886,052 in 2013-14 (Open Doors, 2014). The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) broadly defines an immigrant as any individual who is not a U.S. citizen or national of the United States (Department of Homeland Security, 2015). These students differ from international students, who include anyone studying at an institution of higher education in the United States on a temporary visa that allows for academic coursework (Institute of International Education, 2015). Immigrant and international students bring with them unique heritages that increase cultural awareness and appreciation, thereby increasing the intellectual capital of residents in the host country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Bevis, 2002). Therefore, the increase enrollment of foreign-born students “reflects the competitive edge that universities and colleges in the United States have in the global environment with respect to dynamism, diversity, and excellence”(Evivie, 2009, p.2).

On average, all the leading U.S. host institutions have more than doubled their international student enrollment over the past 15 years (Open Doors, 2014). Migrant students (immigrant & international) enter U.S. higher education institutions with the intent of receiving a better-quality education than they can receive in their home country (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Marcketti, Mhango & Gregoire, 2006). Likewise, by receiving their education in a different country, international students are able to gain a deeper understanding of their host country’s culture, values, and beliefs, while also serving as cultural ambassadors between their home and

host countries (Lee & Rice, 2007; Marcketti et al., 2006, Evivie, 2009).

While several migrant communities face barriers to higher education in the U.S, African migrant students in particular are consistently ignored in cultural adaptation and adjustment research. However, research has demonstrated that immigrant and international students face difficulty adjusting to the foreign environment, and are thereby extremely limited in their ability to become fully participating members of their academic community (Lee & Rice, 2007). Conceivably one of the most disconcerting facets of this transition is the need to deal with a degree of cultural, educational, and social changes. As a result, these students have faced a series of challenges in their academic success and overall well-being (Chiu, 1995). Yet, the majority of this research overlooks the cultural adaptation and academic experiences of African migrant students, as they are typically conflated with those of Black/African Americans (Kim, 2014). However, these students may experience difficulty adjusting to their new minority status, and becoming acutely aware of their race. In neglecting to thoroughly examine the socio-cultural adaptation of African migrant students, research discounts this group's educational experiences. More specifically, it makes invisible and ignores the adjustment issues of African migrants, and the impact socio-cultural adaptation has on their educational outcomes. Therefore, it is important to understand what influences affect the socio-cultural adjustment and success of African migrant students studying in U.S universities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to explore the lived experiences of African migrant students, enrolled at four-year post-secondary institutions, as they integrate to U.S. colleges and universities, and extend understanding of the factors related to their college adjustment. Despite their increased presence in the U.S., African-born students are one of the most underrepresented

groups in the U.S. school system (Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011; Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004). As a result, there is a lack of empirical research on their cultural adaptation, adjustment experiences, and the unique needs of these students. However, African migrant students who study in the United States come from a particular context that uniquely affects their cultural adjustment. On a personal level, being an African immigrant and having witnessed the plight of these students as they navigate through the U.S. post-secondary system, I aim to shed light on their unique challenges and barriers.

## **Background**

Before moving forward, a brief background on African students' migration patterns, education patterns, and the challenges migrant students face is presented. This provides readers with a better understanding of this community, and the adjustment issues African immigrant/international students experience before the literature review and methodology are discussed.

**African migration patterns to the U.S.** The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 “was created to redress past wrongs against Eastern and Southern Europeans who had been denied access to the United States for forty years due to strict immigration policies and quota systems” (Mwangi & Chrystal, 2014, p.4). This policy replaced the national origins formula, which limited immigration on the basis of existing proportions of the population, thereby preventing immigration from changing the ethnic distribution of the country. By demolishing the quota system the number of Black immigrants has risen, with only 4.3% of African immigrants having entered the United States prior to 1970 (Hernandez, 2012).

The growth of African immigrants is especially evident among recently arrived immigrants, as “Africans had the fastest growth rate from 2000 to 2013, increasing by 41%



during that period” (Anderson, 2015, p.1). The more recent wave of voluntary migration from Africa can also be traced back to the Refugee Act of 1980 and the Diversity Visa program of 1990, which encouraged immigration from conflict-ridden and under-represented nations (Anderson, 2015). While in the past few decades the majority of African immigrants stemmed from Anglophone countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Liberia, diversity and refugee programs have expanded the list of countries sending significant numbers of immigrants (Capps, 2012). For example, in 2013 the majority of African refugees originated from Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia (Anderson, 2015).

The United States receives the largest number of international students, followed by the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia (Open Doors, 2008). Likewise, in 2013 there were 35.7 million immigrants, ages 25 and older that were college educated (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Among these migrants, there have been a growing number of African born migrants residing in the U.S., which the U.S. Census Bureau reports has nearly doubled each decade since 1970 (Gabino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014). More specifically, the foreign-born African population has nearly doubled from 2000-2010, with 1.1 million African immigrants residing in the U.S. (Capps, 2012).

**African migrant students’ education patterns.** In terms of educational attainment, when “compared with the overall foreign-born population, the foreign born from Africa had higher levels of educational attainment” (Gabino et. al, 2014, p.9). High levels of educational attainment among the African born students are partially attributable to their decision to attend U.S. higher education institutions. While specific data does not explicate the number of African immigrants attending U.S. institutions, the number of international students from Sub-Saharan Africa has increased by 21% (Open Doors, 2014).

African immigrant and international students are conceptually important because they represent the intersection between race and immigration in the United States (Bennett & Lutz, 2009). More specifically, they “embody countervailing sociological forces” (p. 72), as on one hand they are a migrant group in a country shaped by the immigrant achievement narrative, and on the other hand they are members of a racial group located in a place of disadvantage on the racial hierarchy (Bennett & Lutz, 2009). In his study on students who attend selective U.S. institutions, Massey, Mooney, Toress, and Charles (2007) demonstrated that black immigrants, including immigrants from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, were overrepresented among the 28 selective colleges examined in their study. Further examination revealed that black immigrants came from two-parent households, and had fathers with a post-secondary degree, at higher rates; thereby, demonstrating important socio-economic and demographic characteristics in college attendance. Likewise, Bennett and Lutz (2009) demonstrated that black immigrants enroll in all postsecondary institutions at higher rates than native-born Blacks and Whites, with African immigrants specifically having a higher level of educational attainment than both native Blacks and Whites.

International students from Sub-Saharan Africa comprise eight percent of globally mobile students worldwide, leaving Africa with the highest outbound student mobility rates (International Institute of Education, 2011). The bulk of international students from Sub-Saharan Africa come from Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Cameroon and Ethiopia (Institute of International Education, 2014). The “majority (58 percent) of students from Sub-Saharan Africa are enrolled at the undergraduate level, with less than one-third (30 percent) enrolled at the graduate level, and 12 percent enrolled in non-degree programs or on Optional Practical Training (OPT)” (International Institute of Education, 2011, p.7). Although there is minimal empirical

research on this population, statistics illustrate that South African students show the greatest interest in the business management, engineering, or the fine/applied arts fields, while Nigerian students demonstrated strong interest in the engineering, business management, and natural sciences.

Research suggests that the adjustment experiences of African migrant students differ from that of those from other continents (Warren & Constantine, 2007). However, there is minimal research that explores the experiences of this particular group of students in any detail (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Thus, the choice to study in American universities may present unique challenges for African migrant students not thoroughly addressed in cultural adaptation or student adjustment literature.

**Challenges facing migrant students.** While African migrant students are entering U.S. institutions at growing rates, they “are often at a disadvantage in the racial hierarchy of American society...” (Kim, 2014, p. 581). Upon entering the U.S., research has outlined that the most common adjustment issues experienced by African international students include difficulties with acculturation, prejudice, and financial concerns (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Lewis, 2000; Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Therefore, these students face a series of barriers to their social adjustment that impact their cultural adaptation into the university. More specifically, black students are thought to maintain both their heritage and local culture while simultaneously socializing into the two cultures (Valentine, 1971; Kim, 2014). However, background and contextual obstacles may impede on students’ ability to connect with the academic and social culture of their institution, thus impacting their socio-cultural adjustment and academic performance (Kim, 2014).

***Cultural barriers.*** The person-environment fit theory outlines, "that individuals fair best

in settings in which they fit well with the norms and aggregate characteristics of students and much less well in settings in which they are outliers” (Eccles & Roeser, 2011, p.232). Ergo, the ability to integrate one’s home culture and the new culture is influenced by the “degree of similarity (actual or perceived) between the heritage and receiving cultures” (Shwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, Szapocznik, 2010, p.239). Cultural adjustment has been seen to have a negative association with differences in worldview, societal norms and expectations, and interpersonal relationships (Arthur, 2000). Migrant students who espouse values and beliefs that differ from those of their host country experience increased difficulty adjusting to their host culture. Therefore, African migrant students face challenges integrating into the culture of U.S. institutions, especially African international students who have demonstrated lifelong adjustment problems related to cultural differences (Hyams-Ssekasi & Mushibwe, 2014). Cross-cultural differences may lead African migrant students to experience social isolation and a profound difficulty in adjustment.

Allen (2001) outlines that many African students come from cultural backgrounds that value interpersonal relationships, hence they may have difficulty adjusting to a culture emphasizing aspects of individualism in their relationship dynamics (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Research outlines that African migrant students are typically guided by principles encompassed in an African-centered perspective to life, which include group survival, communalism, harmony, collective responsibility, commonality, cooperation, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Myrick, 2002; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997; Nobles, 1991; Okeke Sheku, Draguns, & Allen). These principles may cause difficulty adjusting to an American higher education institution that values individualism, independence, and self-reliance (Constantine

et.al, 2005; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). In their examination of the cultural adjustment experiences of African international students, Constantine et.al (2005) demonstrated that students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana felt that the “educational system in the United States was too Eurocentric or oriented toward White cultural values” (p.60). Clashes in cultural values can then lead to increased feelings of alienation and isolation (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Therefore, an incongruent system of values and attitudes between African migrants and their host country may inhibit both cultural and social adaptation.

***Social barriers.*** Liebkind (2008) and Berry (1980) outline that factors beyond heritage culture, such as perceived discrimination and negative stereotyping by the dominating group, prevent migrants from integrating into the dominant culture. Likewise, negative stereotyping is seen to cause an emotional reaction that could directly influence academic performance and adaptation (Steele, 1997; Arson, Fried, Good, 2002). While some African migrants may move to the U.S. in order to escape religious, cultural, or ethic persecution (Population Reference Bureau, 2015), they may face acts of discrimination even after migration.

Increased levels of discrimination or perceptions of prejudice may hinder migrants’ cultural and social integration by strengthening ethnic group identification and rejection of the broader society (Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006). Upon moving to the United States, African migrants encounter the negative stereotypes that are ascribed to African-Americans by the dominant culture, and also face negative stereotypes among African-Americans who view African migrants as less civilized human beings (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Traoré, 2004). This is highlighted in research, in which “experiences of discrimination are frequently not based on Black/White relations but on relations among and between ethnic minority groups” (Rosenbloom & Way, p. 421, 2004). These experiences with rejection, associated with being a member of a

stigmatized social group, may then influence one's personal and interpersonal experiences in a majority-dominated institution (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, & Pietrzak, 2002).

Studies have demonstrated that African students have reported more difficulty adapting to their new surroundings than non-Black African students (Adelegan & Parks, 1985). In particular, African migrant students may have been raised in a racially homogenous country, and therefore they are less likely to have prior experience with racism or discrimination (Bagley & young, 1988; Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996). Consequently, upon entering U.S institutions, race “may become a highly salient issue for many of these students as a result of living in a predominantly White society” (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005, p 58). Thus, instances of prejudice may lead to or exacerbate adjustment difficulties (Winkelman, 1994). While belonging to a co-national group has been seen to aid in the psychological and psychosocial adjustment of African international students, the lack of representation of African students on college campuses may inhibit interaction with co-nationals with similar cultural backgrounds (Chapdelaine & Alexich, 2004). Thus, for these students in the United States, race may have a heightened influence on their adjustment (Constantine et.al, 2005).

***Academic barriers.*** Research has outlined the challenges migrant students experience at U.S. institutions, including difficulties adjusting to the academic culture and understanding faculty (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). This has been attributed partially to lack of language proficiency, as difficulty communicating with professors, classmates, and staff has led to academic challenges and feelings of alienation from the learning environment (Wu et.al, 2015; Kim, 2014). Likewise, low levels of English proficiency has led professors to form negative impressions of migrant students, perceive that they were not well-prepared for class, and encourage migrant students to take remedial courses, which left migrant students feeling that

they lack support in their academic field (Wu et.al, 2015; Terui, 2012; Beoku-Betters 2004).

With research demonstrating an association between student-faculty interactions and positive educational outcomes (Kim, 2014; Cokley, 2000; Dika, 2012), inability to develop these interactions may hinder migrant students' academic adjustment. Furthermore, difficulties adapting to U.S. academic environments have also been associated with taking a reduced course load and a restriction in academic courses (Sue & Zane, 1985).

Studies have demonstrated the unique experiences African migrant students have as they adapt to the U.S. educational system (Guclu, 1994; Senshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000). For example, among West African students, Oluyedun (1997) discussed students' difficulty adjusting to a classroom environment in which the professor did not serve an authoritarian role, and students were expected to become active learners. The interactive nature of U.S. classrooms runs in stark contrast to the more formal atmosphere present in the African educational system, in which professors serve as the sole connoisseurs of knowledge. Therefore, African students may be more inclined to silently observe during discussions, which may then be misinterpreted by professors as acts of disengagement, dis-interest, or lack of preparation (Oluyedun, 1997). Thus, differences in the academic culture between African and western countries may lead to conflicting expectations in the academic environment, thereby creating barriers for academic adjustment. Hence, there is a need to acknowledge migrant students' past educational experiences in their home country in order to understand their adjustment to the American educational system.

***Financial barriers.*** In the past decade, “average tuition costs have increased by 36% at private and by 51% at public four-year institutions, which has made it increasingly challenging for incoming students to come up with the necessary funding” (Obst & Forester, 2011, p.5). This

may be especially burdensome to African immigrants, as they along with other black immigrants (e.g. Caribbean immigrants) have lower than the median U.S. household income (Anderson, 2015). In fact, compared to all U.S. immigrants collectively, black immigrants report a lower median income, with African immigrants having a median income of \$43,000 compared to the \$48,000 of immigrants as a whole (Anderson, 2015). Ergo, for African immigrants and others who grow up in low-income communities, they face lower post-secondary attainment and achievement rates (Baum & Flores, 2011).

The International Institute of Education outlines that “sixty-two percent of all international students in the U.S. receive the majority of their funds from family and personal sources” (p. 5), and after considering funding sources from students’ home countries, more than two-thirds of all international students receive the majority of their funding from outside the United States (Obst & Forster, 2011). Therefore, some African migrant students are able to employ their own resources to fund their post-secondary education. Thus, the ability to fund both their relocation and educational expenses may indicate that these students stem from a higher socio-economic status than the majority of African immigrants.

When compared to education costs in their home countries, African international students may face setbacks in financing their U.S. college education, such as increased tuition and an absence of federal funding (Obst & Forester, 2011). Yet, these students face unique obstacles that inhibit them from addressing these costs. Being that international students are not U.S. citizens, the U.S. government does not provide them with financial assistance, unless they are enrolled in federally funded programs (Obst & Forester, 2011). These students may also find it difficult to improve their financial situation with the work restraints associated with their visa status. More specifically, international students are inhibited from working more than 20 hours a



week or acquiring an off-campus job (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Black, 2006).

The financial burden placed on African immigrant and international students may also be compounded by the fact that these students are expected to provide for their families in their home country (Essandoh, 1995; Boafo-Arthur, 2014). These factors provide an explanation for reports that African migrant students face financial obstacles that prevent them from having enough money for rent, food, clothing, entertainment, and tuition (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005). However, it is important to acknowledge that while Africa is a third-world continent, there are social class differences among its inhabitants. Thus, finances do not present a uniform influence on African students' adaptation to U.S. universities.

### **Statement of Problem**

UNESCO's Institute for Statistics predicts that the U.S. will continue attracting students from Sub-Saharan Africa (Chien & Kot, 2012). In spite of the growing presence of African migrants in U.S. higher education institutions, there is a lack of empirical research on these students' cultural adjustment to the university environment, which has demonstrated an influence on students' social adaptation and overall adjustment (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Research on immigrant and international students as a whole has demonstrated that these students face difficulty adjusting to a foreign environment, and are thereby extremely limited in their ability to become fully participating members of their academic community (Lee & Rice, 2007). While the process of migration is difficult, migrant students face additional obstacles associated with a new educational learning environment and the rigorous learning experience of higher education (Hailu & Ku, 2014). Jaffe-Walter and Lee (2011) outline that "recently arrived immigrant students face multiple issues related to linguistic and cultural dislocation" (p.281). As a result,

these students have faced a series of challenges in their academic success and overall well-being (Chiu, 1995).

African students are one of the most underrepresented minority groups on college and university campuses (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Essandoh, 1995). The term African is used in a very broad sense, as there are multiple linguistic and cultural differences even among individuals who may identify as Africans. As such, their adjustment may differ based on other factors such as their cultural heritage and countries of origin (Boafo-Aurthur, 2013). While there is a great degree of intercultural heterogeneity among African migrant students, individuals from countries located in sub-Saharan Africa display some fundamental similarities with regard to their cultural adjustment experiences in the United States that justify their examination in this study (Essandoh, 1995; Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005). For example, collectivist orientations, reciprocity, and religion are fundamental aspects of African cultures that may influence their adjustment into western societies (Matondo, 2012). The decision to include African immigrant students is supported by research outlining that for visible-minorities adjustment issues may continue to be important even beyond the second generation (Shwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Likewise, research illustrates that the basic process of cultural adjustment shares commonalities across immigrant and international students (Berry & Sam, 1997).

African students are seen to experience heightened difficulty adjusting to U.S. universities compared to other groups (Manyika 2001; Poyrazli & Lopez 2007; Puritt 1978). Puritt (1978) demonstrated that among African college students, participants reported difficulty with adjustment, racial discrimination, depression, fatigue, and lack of comfort with U.S. culture.

For African students in the United States, race may have a heightened influence on their adjustment (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005).

As visible migrants, research suggests that the cultural adjustment of African migrant students to U.S. institutions differ from that of those from other continents (Warren & Constantine, 2007). Therefore, the choice to study in American universities may present many challenges for African migrant students, including the experience of acculturative stress and difficulties with adjustment to the host environment.

### **Significance of the Study**

As outlined in the above sections, there has been an increase in the number of African migrant students entering U.S. higher education institutions. Upon entering these institutions, students face difficulty in their cultural adaptation to the university environment and other adjustment related issues. Despite the growth of the African student population, there is minimal research that explores the experiences of this particular group of students in any detail (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Ergo, the purpose of this study is to specifically examine the socio-cultural adjustment process of African migrant students, in order to understand the factors that are associated with significant obstacles to their adjustment. This study helps to illustrate the diversity within the immigrant/international student community, by addressing a population that has been overlooked. Likewise, this study expands the understanding of access and equity by including the experiences of a sub-set of the migrant population that has not been adequately addressed in higher education research. Increased knowledge on this population also informs the future direction of research on African students. Thus, this study adds to the dearth of literature on African migrant adjustment, and propels further research on this population.

## **Research Questions**

The aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of African migrant students' socio-cultural adjustment process to U.S. higher education institutions. In an effort to understand the lived experiences of these students, my study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the role heritage culture and social class in African migrant students' preparation for college in the U.S.?
2. What barriers did African migrant students encounter as they navigate their way through American universities?
3. How is heritage culture and access to capital associated with their navigation through and around those barriers in their adjustment process?

In analyzing the interviews, a form of qualitative research, I aim to answer these questions through an integrative conceptual framework. More specifically, the framework uses acculturation theory, social/cultural capital formation, and sociological perspectives on integration to build a comprehensive understanding of the students' socio-cultural adjustment. Furthermore, the strength-based approach is examined to address limitations with acculturation and emerging capital formation. More specifically, this qualitative study explores how African migrant students adjust to U.S. higher education institutions, understand the factors that influence the socio-cultural adjustment process for African migrant students, and identify the major adjustment barriers faced by these students. An examination of how students' background (culturally and structurally) and college experiences influenced their socio-cultural adjustment is also included. The conceptual model that frames the qualitative study, which uses appropriate analytic methods, is based on my review of related research (chapter 2) and on research methods discussed in this study (chapter 3).

## **Scope**

The subjects in this dissertation include African college students from public and private four-year colleges and universities, with origins spanning across various African countries. The study concentrates on exploring the pivotal college years. Focusing on this period illuminates the importance of socio-cultural adaptation in their college adjustment. As is discussed in chapter 3, the sample was shaped by my limited ability to access and recruit participants; therefore, students from Ethiopia and participants attending elite research universities were overrepresented.

## **Organization of Dissertation**

Seven chapters are presented in this qualitative dissertation. Included in chapter 1 was the introduction to the purpose of the study, background of the study, statement of the problem, the significance of the study, and the research questions. Presented in chapter 2 is a review of the literature related to theoretical underpinnings of acculturation, social/academic integration, capital formation, and a strengths-based approach. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of the emerging conceptual framework that was used as a guide for this dissertation. Chapter 3 presents a description of the research methodology, which includes the research approach, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, and validity. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion on the limitations of the study.

Chapters 4 through 6 present the major findings from this dissertation. Chapter 4 presents the research findings on students' predispositions towards their socio-cultural adjustment. Specifically, it discusses the importance of family, prior educational background, and heritage culture in preparing African students for the U.S. post-secondary system. Chapter 5 discusses the role of students' university experiences on their socio-cultural adjustment process. Specifically,

this chapter identifies how cultural similarities/differences, race, and peer networks created barriers for students. Chapter 6 provides the findings on how students adapted to the university environment, and navigated around barriers in their adjustment process.

Chapter 7 summarizes the understandings brought out by this study and discusses the implications of the study for students, educational practitioners, and college administrators/faculty. Finally, suggestions for future research is presented to further develop an understanding of the African migrant community and other communities who have been largely excluded in higher education research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter summarizes and critiques literature addressing the cultural and social adjustment of migrant students, and examines the college adjustment research informed by capital formation and social/academic integration perspectives. Initially, the study was framed around understanding the acculturation of African migrant students into U.S. universities. However, through an examination of students' narratives, I discovered limitations in using acculturation theory to understand the adaptation of African migrant students. More specifically, acculturation theory addressed integration into the host culture, but did not provide a lens for understanding how students' heritage culture was associated with their adjustment. Ergo, the study's frame was broadened to incorporate social and cultural capital as alternative frames for viewing college adaptation. Capital formation provides some visibility into the dual culture frames associated with adjustment to the host culture. Furthermore, the strengths-based approach was incorporated to examine how students' African heritage can be used as a frame to understand socio-cultural adjustment.

Ward and Kennedy (1999) outline the interrelated nature between acculturation and socio-cultural adaptation as dimensions in adjustment. Therefore, in the first section of this chapter, I examine the theoretical underpinnings of acculturation and discuss how it has been defined and conceptualized, including a brief overview of the early conceptualization of acculturation. Second, I provide an overview of acculturation research in higher education. Throughout this section, I establish the scope of acculturation research on migrant students focusing on the: *conceptualization of acculturation, implications on psychological adjustment,*

*moderating factors of psychological implications, implications on socio-cultural adjustment, and factors influencing the acculturation process.* This review of acculturation addresses the process of cultural adaptation, and illustrates its association with socio-cultural adjustment.

Subsequently, this chapter focuses on the theoretical frames that provide a better understanding of migrants' socio-cultural adjustment. Socio-cultural adjustment refers to the migrant's ability to adapt to a new cultural context, acquire the social skills to interact within the new culture, and navigate daily life in the new environment (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1999). Therefore, beyond acculturation, I examine aspects of social integration, academic integration, and capital formation to identify factors associated with the socio-cultural adjustment of migrants. I discuss the theoretical underpinnings of social/academic integration and capital formation, and synthesize relevant literature related to the adjustment of African students. Lastly, I provide an overview of the strength-based approach to identify the African cultural strengths that have helped in students' socio-cultural adjustment.

These bodies of literature aided in the development of the study's research questions and conceptual model. Both the research questions and the conceptual model were informed by theories surrounding acculturation, social/cultural capital, and integration, supplemented by explicit consideration of the underlying role of African cultural identity. The integrative framework is presented in the conceptual model at the end of this chapter.

Being that the literature on cultural adaptation and socio-cultural adjustment of migrants is multifaceted and extensive, covering a variety of disciplinary fields including education, psychology, and sociology, it is imperative to set boundaries on the literature to be reviewed. In the following section, I reviewed the conceptualization and usage of acculturation models, theories of capital formation, sociological perspectives integration, and the strengths based



framework. For this review, I directed my search toward studies examining the cultural adaptation and socio-cultural adjustment of immigrant and international students. I conducted a systematic literature search of six electronic databases: ProQuest, MLibrary, Google Scholar, the International Journal of Intercultural Relations, the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, and ERIC. The search terms employed included: acculturation, adaptation, bicultural, and bi-dimensional/ uni-dimensional models, integration, social capital, cultural capital, strengths-based framework, social integration, academic integration, and socio-cultural adjustment. I examined reference lists of all potentially relevant papers and skimmed each abstract to determine its relevance to this study.

### **Acculturation**

This study seeks to expand the knowledge regarding the socio-cultural adjustment of African migrant students through data gathered from African immigrant and international students studying in the U.S. Acculturation is considered a major component of the cultural adjustment process of migrant students. Therefore, understanding adjustment related to culture and identity will aid in uncovering how cultural adjustment impacts students' overall academic experience and well-being.

A majority of immigrants must undergo “a process of adaptation—known as acculturation following their arrival in the United States” (Schwartz, Waterman, Umaña-Taylor, Lee, Kim, Vazsonyi & William; 2013, p. 299). Acculturation has been defined as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, 698). Acculturation requires an interaction of at least two autonomous culture groups, in which a change results in at least one of the cultural groups as part of the interaction (Berry, 1980). Typically this involves

the domination of one group over the other, causing a transmission of cultural changes into the weaker group. However, acculturation can also be a result of an individual's desire to fit in with the host culture.

Cultural change occurs as a result of continuous contact and interaction between individuals from two or more different cultures (Berry, 1980; Berry, 1997; Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). Early conceptualizations have described acculturation as a states of being, which is typically defined by the degree to which migrants have espoused the culture-related values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors of the host culture (Ward, 1996; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). However, studies on acculturation have moved towards describing these stages as adaptive processes, focusing on the potential environmental and individual variables that effect the change over time, or the outcomes of the acculturation process on psychological well-being (Ward, 1996). This process is often conceptualized in research as an individual-level variable measured across a number of domains such as attitudes, values, behaviors, and sense of cultural identity (Ryder et al., 2000).

The process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group has been identified to be a result of a three-phase course: contact, conflict, and adaptation (Berry, 1980). During the contact phase, migrants attempt to overcome culture shock, which is the result of a loss in familiar symbols of heritage culture and social intercourse, in order to engage in intercultural contact with the dominant society (Ober, 2006). However, a conflict ensues when one faces external resistance when attempting to adopt the culture of dominant society, or when individuals struggle to decide whether they need to give up aspects of their heritage culture to adjust to the local context (Berry, 1980). This conflict can then result in psychological implications and/or movement away from acculturation and towards isolation

from the dominant society. However, the ability to overcome this conflict leads migrants to overcome the negative psychological and psychosomatic consequences of cross-cultural contact and change to become adapted to the dominant society (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999).

### **Early Conceptualizations of Acculturation**

The term acculturation stemmed from the field of anthropology, in which the earliest formulation comes from Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936). Acculturation was described as a phenomena that results from continuous first-hand contact with differing cultures, which then leads to a change in the original culture patterns of either or both groups (Redfield, et al., 1936). In 1954, the Social Science Research Council expanded on this formulation to assert that acculturation can be “seen as the selective adaptation of value systems, the processes of integration and differentiation, the generation of developmental sequences, and the operation of role determinants and personality factors” (SSRC, 1954, p. 974). Beyond examining the dynamics, the SSRC also asserted that there is not a single cause for acculturation, nor is there a single effect that can be observed at a particular moment of transition. They asserted that

“[Acculturation is] culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems. Acculturative change may be the consequence of direct cultural transmission; it may be derived from non-cultural causes, such as ecological or demographic modification induced by an impinging culture; it may be delayed, as with internal adjustments following upon the acceptance of alien traits or patterns; or it may be a reactive adaptation of transitional modes of life,” (Social Science Research Council, 1954, p. 974).

These additions highlight that acculturation can stimulate change, encompass an ecological component, be delayed, and may cause migrants to react negatively as they transition (Berry, 2002). This early conceptualization laid the foundation for the development of the uni-dimensional and bi-dimensional models as frameworks to examine the acculturation of migrants and their immediate decedents.

**Models of Acculturation.** While various models for acculturation exist, the uni-dimensional and bi-dimensional models are the two most prominent frameworks that have dominated the study of this complex cultural phenomenon (Flannery, Reise, & Yu, 2001). The use of these models has produced prolific literature that has explored the multiple changes that occur when individuals adjust to different cultural environments. The fields of cross-cultural psychology, social psychology, and sociology have produced a knowledge base that has laid the theoretical and empirical foundations for acculturation research.

***Uni-dimensional Model.*** While early definitions of acculturation emphasize the bidirectional nature of cultural change across groups, later conceptualizations moved towards a unidirectional acculturation process, in that cultural change is thought to occur only in migrants. For example, Marden and Meyer (1964) asserted that acculturation requires that migrants become absorbed in the dominant culture. The push to align acculturation with structural assimilation was criticized by sociologist Milton Gordon, who reviewed the definitions of acculturation and assimilation in his work *Assimilation and American Life* (Gordon, 1964). Gordon outlined that these early formulations neglected to provide a structural perspective on how migrants interact with those from the dominant culture. He therefore proposed that acculturation must be distinguished from structural assimilation, whereby the latter refers to the incorporation of minorities into the primary relationships of those from the dominant society (e.g., social clubs, marriage) (Lakey, 2003).

Gordon (1964) conceptualized acculturation as a progressive process in which individuals seek complete assimilation into the dominant culture through intercultural contact. In this framework, there is an emphasis on the social relationships between native and migrant groups, with those in the majority culture holding a dominant structural position (Bartram, Poros, &

Monforte, 2014). Thus, the unequal power dynamics between native and migrant groups lead migrants to adopt the cultural norms and behavioral patterns of the dominant group. During this process, obstacles such as racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice may lead migrants to experience both internal conflicts and external conflicts with the dominant group. However, once individuals have adopted all the traits and values of mainstream society, they become completely assimilated and there is an “absence of value and power conflict” with the host society (Hazuda, Stern, & Haffner, 1988, p. 690). Gordon outlined that certain external characteristics (e.g. language, dress, emotional expression) are elements of cultural patterns that are more easily modified than intrinsic cultural values (Bartram et al. 2014). This aligns with the more recent complex uni-dimensional models that are multifactorial with regard to measuring cultural domains. Likewise, different aspects of cultural self-identity may proceed along the acculturation continuum at different rates (Triandis, Kashima, Shimada, & Villareal, 1988).

For several decades, research and theory on the adaptation of migrants was characterized by the espousal and development of linear models of acculturation founded on Gordon’s (1964) early conceptualization. This unidirectional and uni-dimensional process of acculturation is a series of movements along a single continuum, ranging from the immersion in one’s culture of origin to the immersion in the dominant or host culture (Suinn, Richard-Figureroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987). Adherence to one’s native culture and immersion into the dominant culture are considered to be part of the same phenomenon, thus acculturation consists of only one dimension. Once individuals are introduced into the host culture, their ability to adjust is dependent on their ability to encompass the local culture. Therefore, migrants have to surrender their heritage culture to gain acceptance and access to the local cultural and social resources. Gordon (1964) considered

this of pivotal importance as he believed “the price of such assimilation ...is the disappearance of the ethnic group as a separate entity and the evaporation of its distinctive values” (p. 81).

The uni-dimensional model conceptualizes acculturation from a unipolar approach; this creates an assumption of mutual exclusion, in which a perfect inverse relationship exists between the heritage and host cultures. Likewise, this model presumes that the unique heritage culture of the migrant group has no impact on the acculturation process (Cabassa, 2003; Palinkas & Pickwell, 1995). Thus, measures using the uni-dimensional model have relied on the degree of similarity between migrants and mainstream society across behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal domains to determine where individuals fall along this theoretical continuum (Lee, Sobal, & Frongillo, 2003). The bulk of these measures have used demographic variables such as generational status, age at immigration, or years lived in the new country, as proxy measures of acculturation. The underlying assumption is that with increased exposure, migrants will be better adapted to the dominant culture. This process is seen as continuing until migrants are culturally indistinguishable from the dominant group (Ryder, Alden, & Paulus, 2000). Ergo, the implicit assumption is that assimilation is the only outcome of acculturation, and this process takes place along a single continuum over the course of residence in the host society. This conception of acculturation has informed much of the early research on cultural change.

***Bi-dimensional Model.*** In the last two decades, the bi-dimensional model has come to the forefront of acculturation research in place of the uni-dimensional conceptualization (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997; Hutnik, 1986). This theoretical perspective asserts that acculturation entails two independent dimensions: maintenance of the culture of origin and adherence to the dominant or host culture (Berry, 1997, 1998; Berry & Sam, 1997). Researchers espousing this competing conceptualization argue that migrants must navigate between their

heritage and host culture when adapting to the local environment. Therefore, the identification migrants have with the host and heritage culture is not mutually exclusive. Hence, unlike the uni-dimensional model, a strong identification with one's heritage culture does not indicate low involvement with the dominant culture (Liebkind, 2001).

Berry's (1997) comprehensive bi-dimensional model of acculturation has been the most widely used framework in contemporary research. The model stemmed from a cluster analysis done on a large international study on the acculturation and adjustment of immigrant youth, which then produced four distinct acculturation profiles. Berry outlines that in plural societies, sojourners (those temporarily residing in a new environment) and immigrants must navigate between the maintenance of heritage culture and the adoption of host culture. For conceptual simplicity, the model presumes that individuals will partake in dichotomous decisions to maintain their heritage identity and embrace the cultural identity of the dominant group.

Berry (1997) proposed that upon entering a foreign environment individuals mitigate between two cultural dimensions: (a) the extent to which they seek to align their desires, values, and social group with the host culture, and (b) the extent to which one adheres to their native cultural characteristics. Adherence to the host culture is an indicator of the level of contact and participation that the migrant has with mainstream society (Berry, 1997, 1998; Berry & Sam, 1997). Combinations of high and low positions on each orientation categorize individuals into four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). These strategies theoretically range from full participation to complete rejection of the dominant and heritage cultures' values, attitudes, and behaviors.

**Figure 1. Berry's (1997) Bi-dimensional Fourfold Acculturation Model**

		<i>Is it considered a value to maintain cultural identity and culture of the country of origin?</i>	
		YES	NO
<i>Is it considered to be of value to develop relationships with host society and its culture?</i>	YES	Integration	Assimilation
	NO	Separation	Marginalization

Two strategies of acculturation indicate the adoption of mono-cultural identities; assimilation refers to the relinquishing of one's heritage culture to identify solely with the host culture, whereas separation refers to maintenance of one's heritage culture by placing no importance on the adoption of the local culture. The bicultural option, termed integration in Berry's model, allows migrants to adopt aspects from the host culture without rejecting their heritage identity (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). However, when migrants reject their heritage culture and that of the dominant host society, they are marginalized from both communities. Early examinations of the acculturation strategies have demonstrated that those who chose the integrative strategy were best able to adjust to their new environment and faced less psychological and socio-cultural difficulties; this was followed by assimilation, separation, and marginalization, with marginalization demonstrating the lowest adaptive value across well-being indices (Berry, 1997; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; LaFromboise & Rowe, 1983).

In Berry's (1997) bi-dimensional analysis, he identified four moderating factors on the acculturation process: (a) the nature of the larger society, (b) the type of acculturation group, (c) demographic and social characteristics of the individual, and (d) psychological characteristics of



the individual (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). In the first moderating factor, the host society's attitudes towards diversity are taken into account, as it may vary from acceptance of cultural diversity to high pressure for assimilation towards a uniform cultural standard. In the second factor, Berry distinguishes among five distinct acculturation groups based on the nature of their contact with the host culture: immigrants, refugees, native people, ethnic groups, and sojourners. Within this classification scheme, international students are described as sojourners, as they reside temporarily in the local context, while immigrants are thought to reside in the environment permanently (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Moke, 1987; Berry, 1994; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). The third factor refers to demographic and social characteristics. Berry posits that certain individual characteristics, such as one's age, gender, socio-economic status, prior intercultural experiences, etc., may impact one's acculturation process and outcomes. Therefore, certain characteristics, such as prior exposure to intercultural contact, may serve to moderate implications such as psychological distress. In the final factor, Berry outlined the impact of varying psychological characteristics that may cause additional distress on migrants struggling to adapt to a new culture. While these factors were discussed as broad influences that may impact one's ability to acculturate, there was no discussion on how they influence the type of acculturation strategy a migrant employed.

### **Discussion of Empirical Literature on Acculturation**

Since the study of acculturation was introduced in the 1930s, there has been a trend in the empirical examination of the acculturation process on immigrant and sojourner populations. Acculturation has been linked to attitudes and health behaviors, including: sexual behavior, substance use disorders, use of preventive health services, and physical activity (Abraido-Lanza, Chao, & Gates, 2005; Evenson, Sarmiento, & Ayala, 2004; Leiblum, Wiegel, & Brickle, 2003).

Health-related research has highlighted the importance of assessing levels of acculturation (Coronado, Thompson, McLerran, Schwartz, & Koepsell, 2005); however, educational research has not extensively examined this phenomenon. This is especially true in relation to international students, as the majority of acculturation research examines immigrant students. Among the existing empirical research, there is a strong focus on five major facets of acculturation: conceptions of acculturation, association with socio-cultural adjustment, association with psychological adjustment, moderating factors of psychological implications, and factors influencing the acculturation process.

**Conceptualization.** Within the existing educational research, early studies of acculturation conceptualized the process as uni-dimensional, with a consensus that as an individual becomes more affiliated with the host culture, his/her affiliation towards the heritage culture will weaken (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980; Lalonde & Cameron, 1993; Padillo, 1980). However, there has been a move toward the adoption of bi-dimensional models, which allows for the maintenance of the heritage culture when adopting host culture values (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980; Flannery, Reise, & Yu, 2001; Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008). Across both conceptualizations, studies have used various survey instruments to measure acculturation, with each instrument exploring different cultural domains such as: language, peer relations, food preferences, media, perceptions of group disadvantage, and degree of identification with heritage culture. Across the studies, students' acculturation experiences are alternatively analyzed as dependent and independent variables, in which the former are mainly interested in explaining which other factors influence the process.

**Socio-cultural Adjustment.** Socio-cultural variables, which acculturation research has outlined to incorporate sources of social support, friendships with international and local

students, identity, and cultural knowledge, have been seen to impact the acculturation process (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Sherry, Tomas, & Chui, 2010; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The studies illustrate that one's ability to interact with differing cultural groups and obtain knowledge of the host culture heightens migrants' ability to identify with the dominant group and undergo cultural change. Likewise, increased awareness of the cultural values and behaviors of the host society has helped migrants to integrate those dimensions into their own cultural identity. Therefore, identification as a member of the dominant culture is often seen as a necessary condition for successful acculturation, as research demonstrates a positive association between acculturation and socio-cultural adjustment. This association may also influence academic performance, as Tinto (1987) "tied risk of dropping out to the absence of socially supportive ties to faculty and fellow students" (Goodnew, 1992, p. 186).

**Psychological Adjustment.** The psychological implications of the acculturation process have come to the forefront of educational research. In examining the impact of acculturation, studies have outlined that this process leads to a series of psychological changes that can result in distress (Berry, 1997, 2005; Wang, Schwartz, & Zamboanga, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006). While smooth transitions may take place through culture shedding and learning, intercultural interactions can cause acculturative stress (Berry, 2005). Acculturative stress refers to feelings of psychological distress as a result of shifts in cultural context. When the stress exceeds the migrant's capacity to cope, it leads to serious psychological disturbances, such as clinical depression and incapacitating anxiety (Berry, 1997). Acculturative stress has been used as a moderator for the association between acculturation and mental health outcomes (Wang, et al., 2010). Therefore,

literature suggests that the acculturation process can cause impediments to students' psychological wellbeing.

**Moderators.** Although psychological implications have surfaced in acculturation research, studies have also examined factors that have moderating effects on this association. Among international students, increased social support and friendships with international and local students has been seen to aid in the “psychological adjustment or emotional wellbeing and satisfaction during cultural transition” (Kashima & Loh, 2006, p. 472). Likewise, researchers have outlined that a language barrier can be a major source of acculturative stress. Among migrants, lower levels of English proficiency have been seen to predict acculturative stress and/or depression (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006). Inability to speak the local language hinders communication within the environment. A lack of competency in the native language may also prevent one from understanding the meaning behind certain cultural practices and traditions. Thus, low levels of language proficiency may exacerbate the inability to adhere to the cultural norms of the dominant group.

**Influential factors.** Among the growing body of literature on migrant adjustment, there has been a push towards examining the factors that impact migrants' cultural integration. Even after one has attempted to adopt the cultural values and behaviors of the dominant society, increased levels of discrimination or perceptions of prejudice have been seen to hinder acculturation by strengthening ethnic group identification and rejection of the broader society (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006). Likewise, generational status, education level, income, ethnic density of neighborhood, and age have all been outlined as factors effecting the

acculturation process (Padilla, 1980). Thus, the adoption of host culture and transitions in cultural identity are not necessarily a fluid processes unaffected by environmental factors.

### **Summary.**

The literature reviewed sought to uncover the nuances of cultural adaptation among migrant students. While acculturation is the process of cultural change one undergoes after exposure to a new culture, the primary models used to conceptualize this phenomenon differ in the degree of importance they place on heritage cultural maintenance. More specifically, the uni-dimensional model assumes that acculturation is a zero-sum phenomenon. The conceptual differences in these frameworks may have serious implications on the empirical literature seeking to analyze this phenomenon.

The review across the uni-dimensional and bi-dimensional studies demonstrates that research has contributed to a better understanding of migrant student adjustment. It is also clear from the reviews that most studies, despite the use of different measures, discuss the acculturation process as being multifaceted and resulting in a series of psychological and socio-cultural implications. Similarly, there is consensus that at the heart of the acculturation process is the change in cultural identity that links migrants to the host cultural milieu.

Several studies (e.g., Berry, 2003; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) have suggested that successful acculturation depends on an individual's degree of identification with his or her host and home cultures. However, both the conceptual models and empirical literature seeking to understand this process neglect to provide a full delineation of culture. Therefore, migrant students are often examined as a collective, thereby neglecting to account for the influence of regional geography and heritage culture. In neglecting to draw the distinction among the acculturation processes of diverse cultural groups, the empirical evaluation of

immigrant and international students assumes a homogenous migrant population. However, the ability to relinquish heritage culture or adopt the host culture may be impacted by the degree of similarity between the two cultures. This was demonstrated in differential acculturation outcomes across those from different heritage cultures (Shwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010; Berry, 1997; Padilla, 1980; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). For example, Jang and Kim (2010) saw differential levels of acculturation across those from individualist vs. collectivist cultures. Likewise, in an early study Surdam and Collins (1984) demonstrated that international students from western countries adjusted better to American institutions than those from third world and eastern hemisphere countries. Therefore, the cultural background of African migrant students may represent a significant factor in their acculturation and adjustment process. However, without a full explanation of culture, it is unclear how specific facets of migrants' cultural values are shifting and the impact of heritage culture on the adjustment process.

### **Integration**

This section is organized around an adaptation of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) perspectives on social and academic integration. Tinto discussed social and academic integration as separate processes by which students interact with the institutions' social environment, and comply with the norms of the academic environment. While his perspectives on integration sought to explain the process of student attrition, I discuss these perspectives as processes associated with students' socio-cultural adjustment to college life. Tinto's (1993) theory has been criticized for its neglect to account for cultural specific variables that impact integration (Guiffrida, 2005); however, this study uses a cultural perspective to examine the association between students' culture and their integration.

## **Social Integration**

In the current study, social integration is conceptualized as the ways that African migrants interact with members of the community and community settings. As outlined in the prior sections, acculturation literature has demonstrated an association between developing friendships with host nationals and positive cultural transitions (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008). However, as Terenzini and Pascarella (1991) discuss, social integration is influenced by similarities in the value systems and attitudes between students and the institution. Therefore, there is not a uni-directional relationship between social integration and cultural adaptation. More specifically, students' ability to integrate into their social environment may work to either facilitate or hinder their cultural adaptation, and/or inability to adjust to the cultural values of the host environment may inhibit social integration. Nevertheless, social integration is critical to understanding migrant adjustment, as it includes the facets of the host environment that provide students with support and a means for interaction (Diwan & Jonnalagadda, 2002; Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000).

Within the field of sociology, research has considered the “fit” between a subset of students, e.g. minorities, and educational institutions (Allen, 1985). More specifically, a poor fit has led to impediments on educational outcomes; which research suggests may explain why “Black students have not fared well on predominately white college campuses... they have lower persistence rates, lower academic achievement levels... poorer overall psychosocial adjustment...”(Allen, 1985, p. 134-135). This may be attributed to differing social norms that inhibit social integration, as Guiffrida (2003) found that the differing social norms of African Americans made it difficult for them to adjust to their campus environment. Furthermore,

differing patterns of integration have also incited Black students to feel marginalized in their university community (Tinto, 1993).

Impediments to minority students' social integration and college adjustment can be partially attributed to the unrelenting discrimination that students face at predominately white institutions (Allen, 1992). Hurtado (1992) outlined that "a college's historical legacy of exclusion can determine the prevailing climate and influence current practices" (Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, Hurtado, & Allen, 1998, p. 282). For black migrant students, racial issues may become increasingly salient, as this may be their initial confrontation with racial barriers in educational contexts (Kim, 2014; Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996). As a result, the environmental stress caused by the university in the form of micro aggressions and stereotype threat can undermine student performance (Solórzano, Allen, Carroll, 2002). Therefore, racial micro aggressions provide an explanation for the influence of campus, and surrounding community's, racial climate on the educational experiences of minority students (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). This aligns with the acculturation research outlined earlier in this chapter, which illustrates the negative association between perceptions of prejudice and poor social adjustment.

### **Academic Integration**

Due to the varying academic resources offered both between and within schools, literature on college choice asserts that students of different races, ethnicities, social classes, etc. will experience divergent learning opportunities (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2003; Garet & DeLany, 1988; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; Pachon, Federman, & Castillo, 2000). More specifically, this research demonstrates that, "urban, low-income students of color encounter unique challenges gaining access to rigorous academic courses, adequate educational resources, quality instruction, early college counseling, and other college



prerequisites” (Allen et.al, 2003, p.2). Likewise, immigrant students demonstrate increased likelihood to attend schools “that face high teacher and staff turnover and that are overcrowded, understaffed, and plagued by violence and racially hostile peer cultures” further impacting students’ readiness and ability to learn (Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009, p. 152).

In their study of Gates Millennium Scholars, Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2003) demonstrated that the scholars’ level of academic preparation and forms of social support influenced their ability to successfully transition into the university environment. Despite their ability to excel academically at the secondary level, this was not indicative of adequate college preparation. Among all minority groups, a high proportion of students reported difficulty adjusting to the academic rigor of the university. Along with a large share of the African immigrant population, these scholars stem from a low socio-economic background. With school quality linked to socio-economic status, analyses on these scholars demonstrated that school factors such as size, resources, control, etc., shape students’ outcomes (Trent, Wong, Owens-Nicholson, 2004). Therefore, this study further illustrates the association between academic preparation and academic integration. Furthermore, much like African international students, who must be academically competitive to enter western universities, this group of scholars represents some of this nation’s most accomplished high school graduates. Yet, despite their academic wherewithal, students who had more economic, social, cultural, and human capital were more inclined to succeed academically (Allen et al, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

The findings in the Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2003) and Trent, Wong, and Owens-Nicholson (2004) studies illustrate that educational outcomes are “a social process, shaped by human exchanges within definitive socio-cultural contexts” (Allen et. al, 2003, p.21). Literature on the adjustment of immigrant and first-generation American students demonstrated

an association between acculturation and academic adjustment (Plunkett & Bámaca-Gómez, 2003; Manaster, Chan, & Safady, 1992). Furthermore, studies have seen that those students with higher acculturation scores tended to fare better academically (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004; Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003; Roger, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991). Among the international student populations, research has outlined the difficulty sojourners have in adjusting to the post-secondary environment. More specifically, studies have demonstrated that international students have had difficulty participating in class seminars (Han, 2007), understanding professors' expectations and grading style (Zhou, Freg, & Bang, 2006), taking lecture notes (Huang, 2006), and comprehending professors (Kuo, 2011). Therefore, differences in the academic culture of the institution may impact student's academic integration.

Allen (1988) outlines that black students "enter college with educational disadvantages carried over from earlier years of schooling," this has been associated with greater reports of social and psychological distress (p. 184). Similarly, among international students, academic mismatch has been seen as a contributor to stress. International students may expect to excel or perform at the same level academically as they did in their home countries (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). However, differences in academic expectations between host and heritage culture may inhibit them from doing so, resulting in psychological distress and decreased levels of adaptation (Chen, 1999). Likewise, studies demonstrate that a mismatch in the "the quality and efficiency of services provided by educational institutions" may serve as a stressor (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 705). For example, Sherry, Bhat, Beaver, and Ling (2004) outline that international students had lower perceptions of the quality of services offered by their prospective universities, which led to increased difficulty adjusting to the academic rigor of U.S institutions. Thus, in addition to

the psychological and socio-cultural implications, low-levels of adaptation to the host nation's academic culture may impede on academic integration.

### **Capital Formation**

Capital formation refers to the various social processes that build knowledge of educational options and provide support as they navigate through their educational system (St. John & Fisher, 2011). St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2011) conceptualization of academic capital formation, which is the theoretical framework grounding this section, stems from elements of both social and human capital theory. This conceptualization takes into account both Coleman's (1988) emphasis on individual progress and Bourdieu's (1977) focus on social reproduction, thereby acknowledging the importance of educational systems as sources of social reproduction for African migrant students, while also maintaining a focus on individual aspects of social capital theory (St. John et.al, 2011; Winkle-Wagner, 2013).

### **Social Capital**

In the field of higher education, researchers have investigated college student outcomes using social capital as a theoretical framework (Allen, 1992). Black students able to successfully adapt to the university environment, have been seen to "establish social relationships with Whites, adjust to Black-White cultural differences, and cope with college academic requirements that are more demanding..." (Allen, 1992, p. 29). Furthermore, Tinto (1993) argued that students could only succeed academically if they are socially integrated into the university. However, "for many Black students attending predominately White institutions, the campus environment does not provide high levels of social integration" (Tinto, 1993, p.324). Therefore, successful university adjustment is associated with student's access to social capital.

While theorists differ in their specific conceptualization of social capital, Bordieu and

Coleman define this concept by one's social networks, relationships, and the ability to utilize necessary resources (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998; Coleman, 1988, 1990). More specifically, Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of social capital explores relationships among individuals, as he stresses that individuals are not independent entities. Furthermore, he outlines that social capital encompasses a variety of diverse entities, "with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure" (p. S98). However, Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as consisting of social relationships and the resources that are encompassed in the relationships (Portes, 1998). In acknowledging social reproduction as it concerns the unequal power among status groups, applying Bourdieu's definition sheds light on how African migrants may have unequal access to resources or structural constraints as they adjust to American universities. Therefore, Coleman's neglect to acknowledge oppressive social structures ignores systems that may create barriers to African migrants' socio-cultural adjustment to the university environment (Musoba & Baez, 2009).

St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2011) explicate cultural capital as an aspect of the social process influencing academic outcomes. While St. John et al. (2011) focus on one's knowledge of higher education; cultural capital refers to specific knowledge, skills, abilities, and norms that are distinctive of social mobility. Underrepresented students typically "come from backgrounds which have not prepared them to identify with, or even to recognize the central values of academic life, and which have not provided adequate models of intellectual activity" (McGrath & Spear, 1991, p. 24). Consequently, they lack the social and cultural capital to convert their academic knowledge into success in the university environment (Walpole, 2003). McGrath and Spear (1991) refer to this difficulty adapting to new intellectual and cultural communities as

structural disarticulation. Thereby emphasizing the need for students need to integrate into both the social and cultural components of the university in order to adjust to the university environment.

The development of a social network in a new environment is an important factor for successful adjustment (Wang & Kanungo, 2004). St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2011) demonstrated that not only do supportive networks influence college aspirations and preparation, but they also impact students' educational access and outcomes. For example, peer support has been seen to facilitate a successful transition to college, as well as serve as a predictor for college grades and college adjustment (Hertel, 2010). Putnam (2000) discerned between two types of social capital, i.e. bridging and bonding (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012). The former is comprised of weaker ties that connect a person to different networks, thereby enabling an individual to gain access to new perspectives and disperse information. However, bonding social capital consists of more in-depth relationships that provide emotional support (Lin et.al, 2012). Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) outline that, "greater amounts of social support and stronger social ties with both locals and co-nationals are generally incremental to the newcomers' psychological adjustment, or emotional wellbeing and satisfaction during cultural transition"(Kashima & Loh, 2006, p. 472). This corresponds with research demonstrating that difficulty with adjustment is associated with inadequate preparation prior to arriving to the U.S., inadequate support while in the university environment, and social isolation (Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997; Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005). For African migrants, differences in ways of being and interpersonal communication patterns may contribute to social adjustment difficulties (Constantine et.al, 2005). This is furthered by research demonstrating increased socio-cultural stressors among African migrant students, attributable to a lack of social support (Smith &

Khawaja, 2011).

## **Human Capital**

Human Capital Theory stresses the significance of education and training as the key to participation in the new global economy (Sen, 1997). This aligns with immigrant and international students who enroll in U.S. universities to “gain skills that will allow them to confront issues such as poverty and promote economic growth in their home countries” (Vaughan, 2007, p.1). However, migrant students may come across barriers to financing their education, thereby causing finances to serve as impediments to their college adjustment.

Research outlines the importance of successful adjustment for student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Keup & Stolzenberg, 2004), however concern over finances affects this process. Financial concerns have led students to face increased levels of anxiety; with several studies illustrating that minorities experience greater levels of stress associated with financial concerns than white students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991). This form of stress, referred to as financial stress, is “the unpleasant feeling that one is unable to meet financial demands, afford the necessities of life, and have sufficient funds to make ends meet” (Davis & Manter, 2004, p. 4). Likewise, sufficient funding is associated with enhanced academic performance, increases in college persistence, and contributes to social integration (Hurtado, Laird, & Perorazio, 2003; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). According to the Pew Research Center's recent statistical portrait of black immigrants, the household income for black immigrants is lower than the median American income (Anderson, 2015). Thus, African immigrants may face additional obstacles to adjustment attributable to finances.

In terms of international students, only a minority of students receives funding from the U.S. government, thereby ignoring lower-resourced countries that are in need of the universities’

expertise (Vaughan, 2007). Jiménez (2011) outlines that non-refugee immigrants do not receive federal funding or other funding for integration programs. Likewise, Orfield (2005) illustrates that “access to college has been increasingly threatened by large increases in tuition, reduction in state and federal resources, more intense competition for college space, and growing economic inequality in the country” (p. 4). St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2011) outline that while aid is associated with a sense of agency in college choice, it may also impact adjustment. Therefore, as the numbers of migrant students from African countries continue to rise, it becomes especially important that higher education institutions better understand their financial issues and college experiences, especially as they relate to their adjustment to the United States (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005).

### **Strengths-Based Approach**

“Globalization, race, ethnicity, and class interact in complex ways to place marginalized group members at disturbing risks for persistent school failure...”(Bowman, 2013, p. 301). Ergo, in acknowledge the racial, class, ethnic, and gender barriers that hinder development, the strengths-based approach addresses the psychosocial difficulties migrants may face on U.S. campuses (Bowman, 2006). Furthermore, Bowman (1989, 2006, 2011, 2013; Smith, 2006) outlines that strengths-based approaches to research reveal the role that both external protective factors and personal strengths have on instilling resilience and success despite adversity. Therefore, this approach underscores the importance of “identifying the cultural strengths that have permitted members of various ethnic groups to survive and flourish” (Smith, 2006, p. 17). Thus, the strengths-based approach will help to illuminate the role of African culture in supporting students’ socio-cultural adjustment.

The emphasis on cultural strengths in the strength-based framework also moves away

from the traditional interpretations of cultural capital theory, and moves to what Yosso (2005) describes as a concept of community cultural wealth. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of capital "identifies how privilege and status are protected and maintained, but it does not address how these constructs are resisted by marginalized people" (Jayakumar, Vue, Allen, p.556). However, through a critical race theory lens, Yosso (2005) provides a critique of deficit theories surrounding the cultural knowledge of communities of color by acknowledging how the cultures of these students can nurture and empower them. Students of color can draw from communal funds of knowledge as a resource for advancement (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). Therefore, the strengths-based framework acknowledges the cultural capital that marginalized groups bring with them to the university setting.

Marginalized groups may face difficulty with cognitive appraisals as they adjust to their roles as a university student. More specifically, role strain, which refers to both objective barriers (i.e. academic and financial) and subjective appraisals (i.e. role conflict, overload, discouragement, ambiguity), may impede on migrants' socio-cultural adjustment. These students will then undergo a process of mobilizing multilevel cultural strengths, role adaptation, in order to successfully adapt (Bowman, 2006). This aligns with the concept of community cultural wealth, as "community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p.77). Therefore, in examining the adaptation of African migrants to their universities, this study may illustrate what inherent or acquired strengths that aid in students' adjustment process.

## **Summary**



When migrant students, “are first exposed to a foreign culture they undergo several psychological, behavioral, and cognitive adjustments”(Antonakopoulou, 2013, p.60). Thus, these students may face a series of adjustment barriers that include, but are not limited to, cultural adaptation and difficulty participating in social interactions (Antonakopoulou, 2013). Oberg (1960) designated the term culture shock to describe the feelings of discomfort experienced by those trying to adjust to life in a new culture (Boafo-Aurthur, 2013). This aligns with research discussing migrants’ feelings of acculturative stress as they adjust to foreign environments, which is attributed to impediments on their physical and psychological well-being (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey 2005; Pantelidou & Craig, 2006). As outlined in this section, migrants’ background characteristics (i.e. race, socio-economic status, academic preparation, etc.) may exacerbate difficulties with cultural, social, and academic integration into the university environment. Ward (1999) pinpoints the differentiation among migrants, outlining that those immigrating to similar cultural environments will face less difficulty adjusting. Ergo, African students who migrate from developing countries may face additional impediments to their cultural adjustment.

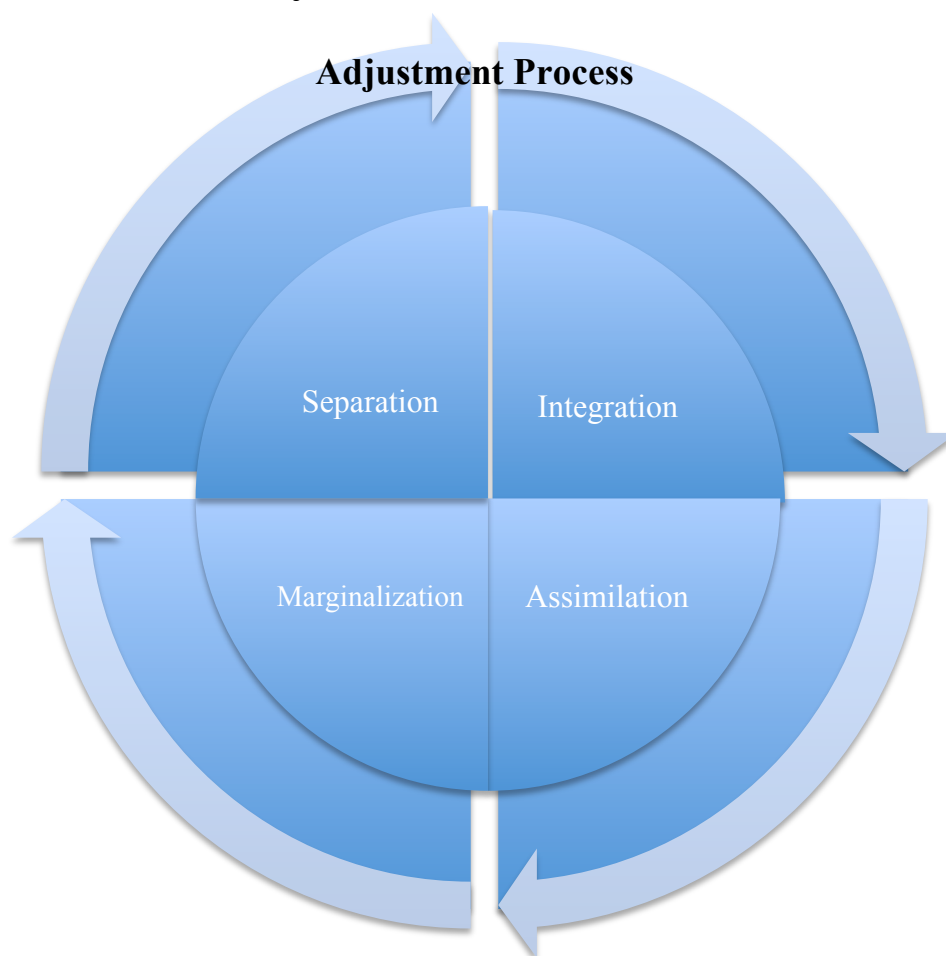
### **Conceptual Framework**

Frameworks have been defined as a map used by researchers to cultivate a basis for the development of a hypothesis or research questions (Fulton and Krainovich-Miller 2010). The conceptual framework used in this study aids in the understanding of factors that contribute to the socio-cultural adjustment of African migrant students. It synthesizes various components of the social and cultural adjustment processes, which were reviewed in the first and second chapters, and helped refine the research questions and guide the study. More specifically this

framework helped to determine variables important to the socio-cultural adjustment process, and provide insight into their relationships.

The integrated framework for this study is grounded in the literature describing migrant adjustment, as an aspect of adaptation, and from theory and research on acculturation, social/cultural capital, and social/academic integration. Earlier in this chapter, acculturation was discussed as a theory to understand the factors influencing African migrants' cultural adaptation into U.S. universities. Literature has characterized acculturation as most informed by a sojourner's decision to adopt the host culture (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, we learned from Berry's (1997) bi-dimensional model of acculturation that acculturation is not uni-dimensional, as students decide whether to adopt or reject both the host and heritage cultures (See Figure 1). As outlined in this chapter, cultural psychologists have recognized that acquiring the beliefs, values, and practices of the host country do not necessarily require migrants to discard aspects of their heritage culture (e.g., Berry, 1980). Therefore, unlike the uni-dimensional model, this framework allows for sojourners to attain a bicultural orientation (Moyerman & Forman, 1992). This alternative representation of the decision-making process better represents the fluid and dynamic nature of acculturation as suggested by research (Berry, 1997; Ryder, Alden, & Paulus, 2000). In placing the acculturation decision within the socio-cultural adjustment framework, we can recognize the role of acculturation on various facets of students' adjustment to U.S. universities.

**Figure 2. Acculturation and Adjustment**

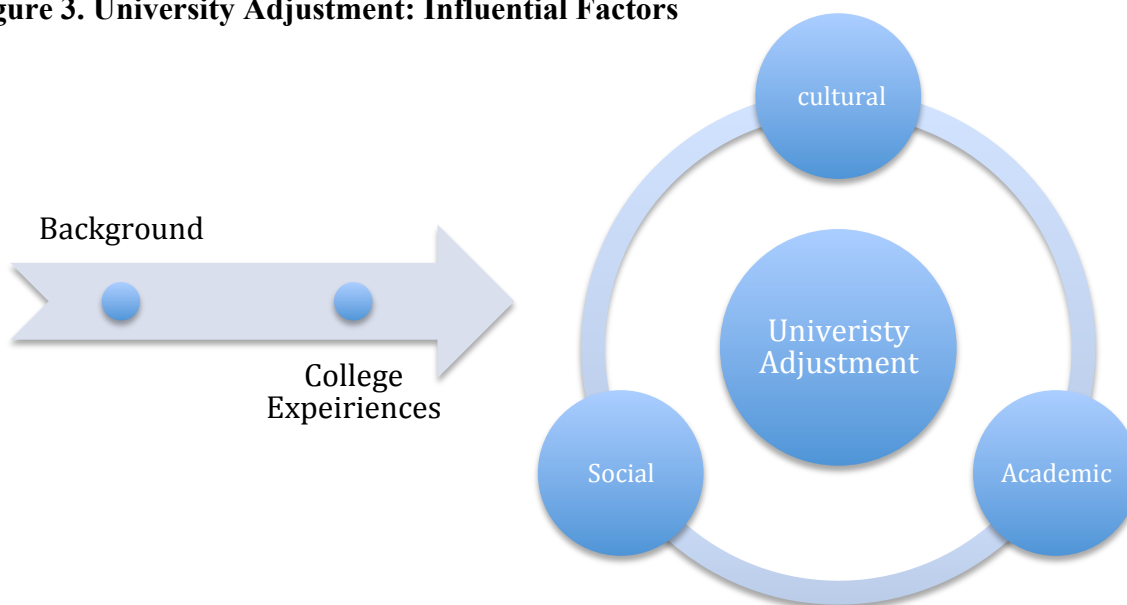


Earlier in this chapter, sociological and economic perspectives were discussed as they pertain to socio-cultural adjustment. The review illustrated an association among students' cultural (acculturation), social, and academic integration. From the sociological perspective, via the social/cultural capital and social/academic integration perspectives, research has outlined the influence of race, social and cultural capital, prior academic background, etc. on the socio-cultural adjustment process. In that, students' access to capital was associated with their integration and adjustment to university campuses. Likewise, from the economic perspective, via human capital research, the review demonstrated the impact of SES on creating barriers to

students' academic integration and overall adjustment. More specifically, SES was associated with obstacles to financing education, poor college preparation, and increased workload. Therefore, the literature review discussion is summarized into two categories (background and college experiences) to demonstrate how students' prior and current experiences created barriers or provided support for their adjustment process.

As outlined in Figure 3 below, the circles encompassed within the arrow represent potential influences on students' adjustment (e.g. background and college experiences), as substantiated by the research examined in this chapter. The circles represent facets of students' backgrounds and college experiences that are addressed in the research (e.g. SES, discrimination, academic preparation). Collectively, these factors exert direct influence on students' cultural, social, and academic adjustment; however, they are rarely studied in depth among African migrants. Thus, the framework suggests that one's adjustment is not independent of cultural and contextual influences.

**Figure 3. University Adjustment: Influential Factors**

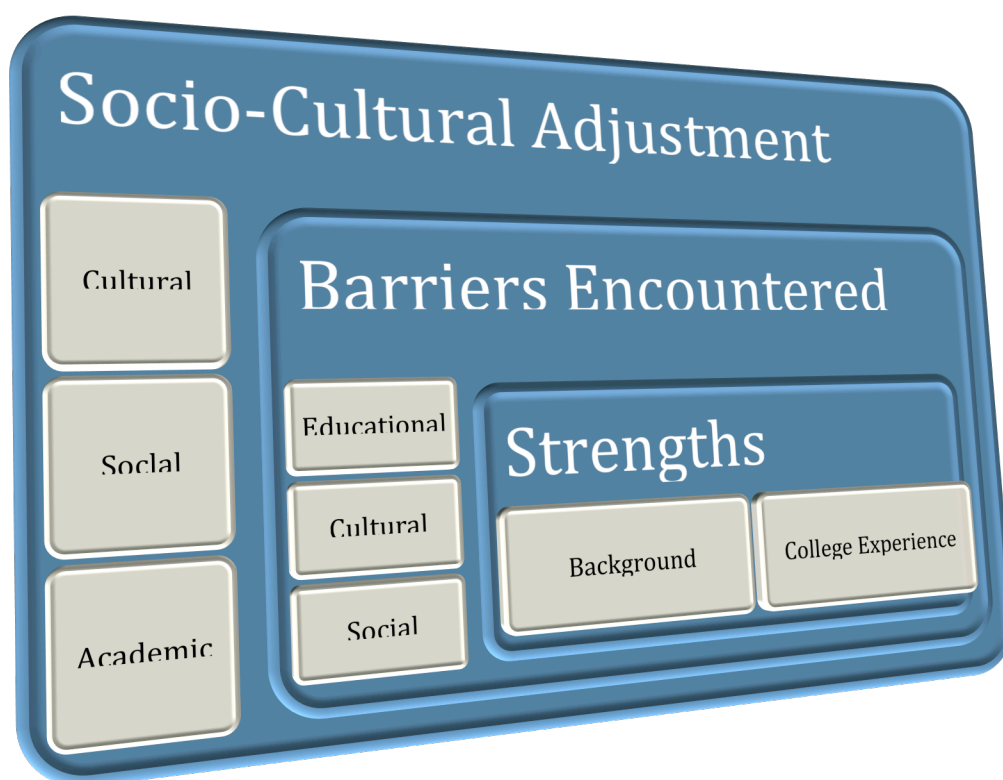


As discussed earlier in this chapter, a student’s cultural adaptation process influences their psychological, socio-cultural, and academic adjustment (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000; Zhang & Goodson, 2014; Plunkett & Bámaca-Gómez, 2003). Cultural adaptation represents a facet of the college transition process, as students must adapt to new values, social norms, academic practices, etc. Yet, Mesidor and Sly (2015) outline that “problems in adjustment in three primary areas, academic, social interaction, and emotional reaction to their novel environment” (p.263), have created barriers to students’ cultural adjustment. However, the extent of the adjustment problems experienced are due to factors that operate on both the societal and personal level (Berry, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992).

In Figure 4, I demonstrate how I saw these concepts, pulled from the preceding literature and initial examination of the data, relate to one another. As discussed in the review, students’ backgrounds and college experiences present unique barriers and support systems that may hinder or facilitate their socio-cultural adjustment. Furthermore, the strengths-based approach recognizes the strengths of students’ backgrounds in helping them successfully adjust to U.S. universities. While barriers and strengths are illustrated as two separate dimensions, they are

overlapping to demonstrate how students' backgrounds and college experiences led them to encounter barriers, but also equipped them with strengths to navigate their socio-cultural adjustment process. Furthermore, cultural, social, and academic adjustment are encompassed within the socio-cultural adjustment sphere to illustrate an association between the three processes. This framework was developed after completing an in-depth examination of the theoretical underpinnings of acculturation, capital formation, integration, and a strengths based-approach, in addition to a review of the literature on migrant students.

**Figure 4. Conceptual Framework: African Migrant Socio-Cultural Adjustment**



This conceptual framework aids in delineating the influences on the students' socio-cultural adjustment through qualitative (incorporating cultural values and context in interview protocols) methods, which yields a fuller understanding of the adjustment process of African migrants. More specifically, through the conceptual framework, I asked in-depth questions to

understand the major factors identified in the literature as being influential to the socio-cultural adjustment of African migrant students. Additionally, through this framework, this study outlines the unique factors influencing the socio-cultural adjustment of a population nearly absent in cultural adaptation research. Ultimately, this framework is the guide for finding the answer to the study's research questions.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

This study was designed to build an understanding of the socio-cultural adjustment process for African immigrant and international students in the U.S. While the study was primarily conducted at a large public research university, a small percentage of the data was collected remotely through phone interviews. Although there is a great deal of literature addressing immigrant and international students' adjustment process in U.S. higher education institutions (Keagan & Cohen, 1990; Nilson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006), the majority of these studies have been conducted using surveys (Tanaka, 2002). However, this study moves beyond a quantitative analysis of the adjustment process of African migrant students and seeks to investigate and explore their lived experiences in the U.S. higher education system. Likewise, a qualitative methodology allowed me as the researcher to explore and understand the socio-cultural adjustment among African migrant students.

The study included data from 28 student interviews, with an effort to be inclusive of diverse groups within the African continent (i.e. country of origin, gender, and religious denomination). Qualitative coding techniques were then utilized to develop an understanding of the interplay between social and cultural adjustment among African migrant students.

This study used analytic techniques from the grounded theory tradition, which provides a systematic means of capturing patterns and meanings, and of developing conclusions and theoretical contributions. Through the use of these techniques, I was able to “develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data,” furthering my ability to understand the students from their own frame of reference (Taylor, Bogdan, Devault, 2015, p.8). The following



section provides an overview of the research approach utilized to address the research questions. Following the research approach, there be a discussion on the data collection and analytic strategies used in this study. This chapter concludes with a consideration of the main limitations of the study.

### **Research Approach**

Wanting to understand the lived experiences and the meanings derived from those experiences by African migrant students, I used a qualitative research method to allow for an inductive exploration of the complexities of the students' lived experiences, while presenting participants with an opportunity to voice their communicative lived experiences (Miller & Glassner, 1997; Taylor, Bogdan, Devault, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Merriam and Simpson (2000) suggest that phenomena “includes both the acts- such as thinking, believing, perceiving- and the things to which these acts are related such as ideas or material objects” (p. 91). Therefore, subjects' are examined through their depiction of their experiences, and how they make meaning of their lived experience. This emphasis on the students' experiences and their interpretations is something that is foundational to both this study and qualitative research (Merriam, 1998).

In-depth interviews were conducted, along with open-ended questions, which were used in an attempt to “have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (Seidman, 2012, p.9). Analyses then “proceed from the central assumption that there is an essence to an experience that is shared with others who have had that experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p.18). Hence, this process requires that the researcher provide an objective examination of various perspectives of the experience, while also providing an in-depth

description of experience, to gain a deeper understanding of the “social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p.189).

It follows that I employed an interpretive paradigm, which focuses on the subjective elements of reality (Gephart, 2004), to addresses the evolving processes that unfold in the complex interactions that establish social reality, and typically depends on qualitative methods of research (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2009). This qualitative interpretive research method assumes that reality is developed inter-subjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially (Kuhn, 1960). Therefore, through subjects’ understanding of their experiences, I was able to put into context the social, interpersonal, and cultural aspects of the African migrant students’ environment.

Understanding that an interpretivist paradigm requires the researcher to be the sole interpreter of the subjects’ voiced experiences, the subjectivity of the researcher should be recognized. Reason being, “interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews” (Merriam, 2009, p. 214). Likewise, Corbin and Strauss (2008) outline that, “it is easy to be blinded by the researcher’s own perspective without even being aware of it” (p. 112). Ergo, as the primary researcher, I was in an ongoing state of reflection during my analysis, by recognizing the influence of my identity, values, assumptions, interests, and beliefs. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) remind us that reflexivity involves “careful interpretation and reflection” during the design, experimentation, analysis, and writing processes (p. 9). This reflection adds an interpretative dimension, and allowed me as the researcher to be visible in the frame of research rather than serving as a detached observer (Stanely & Wise, 2002). Thus, I sought to gain meanings from participants’ descriptions, and arrive at the essence of the lived experiences of African migrant students.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, and Ormston (2013) outlined the importance of developing a criteria that aligns with the aims of the study and the lines of inquiry being pursued. These characteristics emerged from my research questions, which explored the lived experiences of participants. In definitive terms, participants in my study were comprised of students or recent graduates (1 year post-grad) from African countries who immigrated to the U.S, and/or at time of college enrollment did not possess permanent residency status in the U.S. While initially the study was aimed at undergraduate and graduate students, after consulting with my advisor I included students who graduated within one year, as these students were able to provide reflective experiences on their full academic career. Participants in the study also had to meet the following criteria:

- 1) Had to be of African origin born in their home country
- 2) Have to have lived in the United States a minimum of 1 year at the time of the initial study interview; as Qian (2002) suggests, international students must complete at least one year of study to reflect their lived experience in the new environment
- 3) Had to have satisfied at least one of the following additional criteria of a international/immigrant student:
  - a. At the time of college enrollment did not possess permanent residency status in the U.S.
  - b. Or migrated to the U.S after experiencing some formal schooling in their home country.

Schatzman and Strauss (1973) outline that selective sampling is a practical necessity that is “shaped by the time the researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his starting and

developing interests, and by any restrictions placed upon his observations by his hosts” (p. 39). Therefore, my sample was influenced by my accessibility to my population. As I consulted with my advisor, I was recommended to increase my sample size to garner power for my study. I had a hard time recruiting students for the study, as connections made with faculty and leaders across campuses yielded minor results. Additionally, conducting a study in the summer did not yield large numbers, as most students were not enrolled in classes during the summer. However, continued contact with participants and student organizations in the beginning of the fall semester helped to increase my sample size. Thus, my sample was partially based on my ability to make connections with segments of this student population.

### **Participant Recruitment**

According to Patton (1990), the “logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Informative-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about, issues of central importance to the purpose of the research...” (p.169). Being that my population of interest involves the lived experiences of African immigrant and international students, I used purposeful sampling as my selection technique. The use of this technique is justified by fact that participants provide rich information that allows for an exploration of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling assumes that the selection of a sample can provide both first hand and secondary information during the interview process; thereby allowing the researcher to discover, understand, and gain insights into the research problem (Merriam, 1998). There are numerous purposeful sampling designs, from which I pulled from in my study. Specifically, I used two techniques: convenience and snowball sampling.

**Convenience sampling.** Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, and Hoagwood

(2013) outline that convenience sampling requires that the researcher “collect information from participants who are easily accessible to the researcher” (p. 4). Therefore, initial recruiting was aimed at local communities that I was familiar with (i.e. churches and cultural centers). Being affiliated with these organizations, I was familiar with individuals of African descent. During general meetings/gatherings, I discussed my study, and provided my e-mail to those who expressed interest in participating. Likewise, I passed around invitations to participate, which is presented in Appendix B. Through this method I was able to recruit several Ethiopian immigrant students. I feel as though my identity as an Ethiopian immigrant helped me to recruit participants, as students expressed a desire to help a fellow “Habesha<sup>1</sup>.” Additionally, through a connection with a religious center I received names of potential students, to whom I then sent recruitment e-mails, three of which I later interviewed.

In addition to reaching out to these cultural and religious centers, I made contact directly with the student leadership of African centered student associations at the selected university. As an African immigrant student, I had a familiarity with organizations with an adequate concentration of African students at the respective college campus. One of the organizations allowed me to come into their general body meeting, where I provided an overview of my study, made a call for participants, and distributed invitations to participate. Likewise, I contacted professors and lecturers with prior research experiences on African students and/or diversity initiatives at the prospective university as a tool to recruit additional students. While I was in ongoing contact with student leaders, I was unable to garner a large enough sample size. This was due to both a lack of student interest, and the fact that the majority of the members were first-generation American students. Therefore, recruitment e-mails were also distributed to seven African centered student associations at campuses I was familiar with or had a prior affiliation

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<sup>1</sup> A term used to refer to people of Ethiopian or Eritrean descent

with. I contacted each student organization leadership team via the email listed on their website, and their staff/faculty advisor. Likewise, I also sent the recruitment e-mail to the prospective groups Facebook page. At least one follow-up e-mail was sent to the individual/organization if no response was given. The email, presented in Appendix A, defined the purpose of the study, the goals of the study, made a call for participants, and provided my contact information. While I received a low response rate, a few groups stated that they either forwarded my information onto their membership lists or would relay my study to their members in their next meeting. Through this method, I was able to conduct in-person and phone interviews with interested participants.

**Snowball sampling.** Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, and Hoagwood (2013) discuss the benefits of the snowball sampling method, which denotes that informants refer other subjects who have similar characteristics. This method typically increases the number of respondents, as students may be more “receptive to a researcher when the latter has been couched by a friend as trustworthy”(Small, 2009, p. 14). Upon the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked for references for additional participants, and encouraged to ask potential students to partake in the interview. Likewise, each student was sent at least one follow-up e-mail calling for additional references. While only one participant referred a student at the conclusion of the interview, some responded to the follow-up e-mail. This method produced the highest response rate, as only two referred students were unresponsive to recruitment attempts.

### **Data Collection**

While the study uses a critical interpretivist paradigm, it is also influenced by the phenomenological approach of illuminating experience, and identifying the event by exploring how the actors perceive the situation. Therefore, key-informant interviews illustrated how the respondents experienced the phenomenon (socio-cultural adjustment to U.S. universities), while

allowing the researcher to explore, illuminate, and gently probe their responses (Kvale, 1996; Creswell, 1998). Additionally, key-informant interviews allowed for a “detailed investigation of people’s personal perspectives, for in-depth understanding of the personal contexts within which the research phenomena are located, and for detailed subject coverage” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 36). Thus, through an in-depth interview composed of open-ended questions, participants were given the opportunity to provide a detailed examination of their socio-cultural adjustment process from their own perspective.

Through a qualitative investigational perspective, multiple interview designs can be developed to obtain rich data (Creswell, 2007, Turner III, 2010). In this study, I used a general interview design to delve into the depth of the students’ experiences. The general interview guide was semi-structured; in that, it allowed me as the researcher to have a degree of flexibility in the way I composed my questions (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Additionally, the interview questions were open-ended, which allows participants to give detailed responses (Gall et.al 2003). McNamara (2009) outlines that the strength of a semi-structured approach lies in the ability of the researcher “...to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee... and allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee” (Types of Interviews section, para.1). This was especially helpful in this study, as the students in this study varied in their English proficiency. Therefore, I was able to interchange the way in which I posed the questions to cater to each student. The protocol (Appendix D) was formulated based upon my personal reflection as an African immigrant student, a piloted study on the acculturation of Asian students, and the literature review. The first section focused on students’ backgrounds prior to entering their perspective institution. The following three sections focused on students’ college experiences, framed around issues of academic adjustment, campus

climate, and cultural transitions. While there were some pre-constructed questions, I was able to follow-up and ask probing questions. Thus, I was able to interchange the way I posed the questions, so that it related to the students' responses, and explored a personal approach to each interview.

Data collection consisted of three phases: a pre-interview demographic investigation to determine participant eligibility, semi-structured research questions, and researcher reflections. Due to difficulty obtaining a large enough sample size, I conducted two rounds of data collection. The first round consisted of 17 participants. However, under the guidance of my advisor I was instructed to recruit additional participants to increase power. Therefore, a second round of data collection recruited the remaining 11 participants.

Prior to the study, all participants were informed that the purpose of the research is to examine the cultural and overall college adjustment experiences of African immigrant and international students. Seidman (1998) argues that individuals "should not rely on third parties to make contact with [ . . . ] potential participants" (p. 40). Thus, I made it a point to introduce myself either in person or over the phone to every informant prior to the interview. Only one respondent changed their mind about their willingness to participate after our initial contact. In the initial in-person or phone contact with the participants, I asked a series of demographic questions that collected data on their country of origin, year in college, and number years they have been in the U.S. After this contact, two students were informed that they were ineligible for the study. One student studied in the U.K. and was in America for a seminar, and the other was of Caribbean heritage. Eligible students also received a reminder phone call or e-mail prior to the interviews to help ensure attendance. Only one student did not respond to multiple phone and e-mail attempts to schedule an interview after the initial contact.



Prior to beginning the study, students were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C). Those who conducted a phone interview sent an electronic consent form through their prospective university server prior to their interview date; I collected the remaining consent forms on the day of the in-person interview. On the day of the interview I answered the participants' questions, assured of them of the confidentiality of their participation, and asked for permission to audio-record the interview. Once given permission, I turned on the audio recorder and began the interview. Upon completing the interview, I began writing reflective memos. Throughout this process, I wrote notes that summarized what I was learning in the interview, the emergent themes, and how the students' narratives aligned and/or diverged with the literature I reviewed. These memos were helpful in helping me to pinpoint the main themes in the data.

One minor change was made in the interview protocol. Initially, upon asking participants about their parents' occupations, I followed up by asking students about their family's annual income. While initially students were asked to discuss income in terms of a numerical range, the first two students to participate in the interview stated that they either did not know how much their parents made, or declined to answer. Therefore, I asked students if they would classify their familial income as low, middle, or high from which they responded low, low-middle, middle, upper-middle, or high income.

In total, 28 individual interviews were conducted. The interviews ranged in length from 23-78 minutes. The 23-minute interview was a low outlier in length, as multiple probes did not provoke that student to elaborate on her thoughts. To ensure participants were in a comfortable space, the majority of the interviews occurred at a large public research university located in the Midwest, in a conference room in either the undergraduate or graduate library. While initial participants attended this university, the remainder of the sample attended five other

colleges/universities located in the Midwest, West, and East coasts. Students whom I was able to connect with through the religious or cultural center were interviewed at their preferred public library or conference room. Lastly, a few of the students referred to me by prior participants conducted the interview remotely through phone interviews.

### **Participants**

When it comes to qualitative research, numerous factors influence the sample size of the study. Therefore, strict rules do not determine the sample size, but rather “sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (Patton, 2002, p. 244). The guiding principle of qualitative research should be the concept of saturation, in which the collection of additional data does not provide further insight on the topic under study (Mason, 2010). While concept of saturation is “helpful at the conceptual level, it provides little practical guidance for estimating sample sizes for robust research prior to data collection” (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p.59). Hence, without a criterion for sample size, the researcher is able to determine the number of participants needed. After conducting several interviews, and consulting with my advisor, I determined that data saturation and power was reached after I interviewed 28 participants. This sample fell into the Creswell’s (1998) suggested range of 20-30 interviews.

Ultimately, 31 students volunteered to participate in the study. Of those, 29 were eligible based upon their answers to the demographic questions. Of the 29 students, 28 actually took part in the study, as 1 student was non-responsive to several outreach attempts for scheduling interviews. Roughly half of the participants (46%) were international college students. Participants attended six different four-year institutions, of which three were large public

research universities (61%), one a mid-size regional college (7%), and two were large private research universities (32%). Only three of the participants graduated within a year, the remaining were enrolled full time as either undergraduate (15) or graduate (10) students. Table 1 at the end of this subsection contains demographic information about the participants, with Table 2 breaking it down according to immigrant vs. international status. The names listed in Table 1 are pseudonyms chosen to protect the students' identities. More detailed breakdowns of the participants' demographics are included in Appendix E.

**Table 1. Study Participant Basic Characteristics (N=28)**

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Immigrant/ International Status</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Years in America</b>	<b>Completed Year in College</b>	<b>Institution Classification</b>
1	David	International	Ethiopia	4	4 <sup>th</sup>	Public Research
2	Danny	International	Mali	5	5 <sup>th</sup>	Public Research
3	Nicole	International	Ghana	4	4 <sup>th</sup>	Private Research
4	Abraham	International	Kenya	4	4 <sup>th</sup>	Public Research
5	Nate	Immigrant	Ethiopia	6	5 <sup>th</sup>	Public Research
6	Jenny	International	Uganda	1	1 <sup>st</sup> year Masters	Private Research
7	Kane	Immigrant	Cameroon	5	4 <sup>th</sup>	Public Research
8	Kali	International	Ethiopia	1	1 <sup>st</sup>	Public Research
9	Gwen	Immigrant	Ghana	15	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters	Public Research
10	Daisy	International	Rwanda	2	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Private Research
11	Saba	Immigrant	Ethiopia	14	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Masters	Public Research
12	Simon	International	Ethiopia	6	1 <sup>st</sup> year Masters	Public Research
13	Lacy	Immigrant	Ethiopia	7	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Public Research
14	Kay	Immigrant	Mali	8	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Regional College
15	Solomon	Immigrant	Ethiopia	4	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Regional College
16	Rachael	International	Nigeria	2	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public Research
17	Fabeha	Immigrant	Eritrea	10	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Ph.D.	Public Research
18	Amina	Immigrant	Somali	16	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters	Private Research
19	Zaid	Immigrant	Sudan	15	5 <sup>th</sup> year Ph.D.	Public Research
20	Jay	Immigrant	Ethiopia	6	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public Research
21	Bill	Immigrant	Ethiopia	4	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public Research
22	Oscar	International	Nigeria	6	1 <sup>st</sup> year Ph.D.	Private Research
23	Don	Immigrant	Sudan	21	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public Research
24	Gale	International	Kenya	6	Graduated-1 year	Private Research
25	Anthony	International	Nigeria	1	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Ph.D.	Private Research
26	Tom	International	Zimbabwe	5	Graduated-1 year	Private Research
27	Blake	Immigrant	Nigeria	14	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters	Private Research
28	Kate	Immigrant	Ethiopia	15	Graduated-1 year	Public Research

**Table 2. Immigrant vs. International Basic Breakdown**

Variable	Category	Participants	
		Immigrant	International
Average Years in the U.S.		10 years	3.6 years
First Generation College Student	Yes	47%	15%
Private vs. Public Institution	Public Institution	87%	54%
Predominately White vs. Minority- Serving Institution	Predominately White	60%	100%
Self-classified Income	High	0%	62%
	Middle	13%	23%
	Low-Middle	87%	15%

### **Data Analytic Techniques**

All the individual interview recordings were transcribed by the researcher (me), and entered into Atlas.ti qualitative coding software for analysis. Throughout the data analysis I used elements of grounded theory as an inductive approach to answer the research questions. The students were identified with the pseudonyms and their immigrant/international status in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

### **Qualitative Coding Analysis**

Drawing from the techniques of grounded theory's "constant comparative method of analysis" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 22), I conducted three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective with the first 17 interviews. With these initial interviews, I begin my analysis with an inductive "open" coding process to identify relevant themes, creating categories, and comparing the current data to the emergent ideas suggested by other data (Corbin & Strauss, 1988). To form this basic unit of analysis, I read transcripts and memos line by line. In beginning with this coding approach, I was able describe the participants' experiences in their own words. This was

important to me, because I wanted to privilege the students' own perspectives as much as possible; that is, I wanted to ground my analysis in the words of the participants. As I coded, I assigned a specific code to a section of the data using an explicit word or short phrase taken directly from that section of the data (e.g. race, private school, isolated). I did this throughout the initial 17 the individual interviews, after which I began to recognize both commonalities and stark differences in various facets of the students' experiences. This produced several codes, in correspondence with Litchman's (2006) projection that "most qualitative research studies in education will generate 80–100 codes that will be organized into 15–20 categories ..." (Saldana, 2009, p. 20). This coding scheme allowed for an in-depth examination of the background and experience of each respondent.

Being that I understood that analysis is more coherent when major concepts are held to a minimum (Saldana, 2009), I then moved on to disaggregate the core themes. Therefore, following the initial phase of open coding I began the process of axial coding, or theorizing relationships between codes and categories. This led to the development of 41 codes, which were comprised of the main themes that emerged from the data, and delved into students' socio-cultural adjustment, college experiences, and adaptation. After the first round of 17 interviews, this grouping allowed for the elaboration of core themes that permeated in the interviews. Interviews 18-28 began with these codes, while also addressing points in which the data aligned, diverged, expanded the framework, or addressed the research questions. In the final phase, selective coding, I delved into the "the process of discovering, abstracting, articulating theory from data that has been coded in a systematic fashion through open and axial coding into a number of categories and subcategories requires" (Price, 2010). Thus, this coding was informed by theories of acculturation, integration, and capital formation, discussed in the literature review.

Throughout this process, I engaged in an iterative data collection and analysis process that included a regular review of interview transcriptions, as well as reflective and analytical memos that summarized what I was learning and identified new questions and promising directions. Likewise, I continually returned to the existing literature to contextualize emerging themes.

When these three levels of coding were complete, further analysis was conducted using the Atlas.ti software, in order to ascribe yet more meaning to the students' narratives. The Atlas.ti software provides the capabilities to examine the most important codes, based upon frequency, the "number of text passages of a code or memo," and density, the "number of other codes connected with a code" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 277). This next step of analysis aided in the examination of the most important codes amongst both immigrant and international students, which both represented the essence of the students' narratives and addressed the study's research questions. In the final step of analysis, I pulled the core themes resonating from the interviews and examined how they aligned and expanded the framework used in this study.

### **Validity**

Being that this is a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002b). Consequently, qualitative research is not value-neutral but instead influenced by the researcher's values, biases, and ontological and epistemological position (Greenback, 2003). Thus, it is important that I address my own background, so as to understand how my identity influences my values and perspectives.

There "appears to be a general consensus that the researcher's race...matters and therefore should be a consideration when planning, carrying out, and disseminating evaluation research" (Letiecq & Bailey, 2004, p. 348). However, in addition to race, my status as a first-generation college student and Ethiopian immigrant is also relevant to this study. My identity

positioned me in the role of the ‘insider’, thereby granting me with a sense of cultural insight and allowing me to be “more sensitized to certain dimensions of the data” (Berger, 2015, p.223).

Likewise, during the recruitment process, those familiar with the Ethiopian community discerned that I was of African origin, thereby facilitating the recruitment process. Ergo, my status as an African immigrant gave me a degree of closeness to my subject pool. However, being that the participants came from diverse origins, and migrated to the U.S. at different points, I was conscious not to assume a shared identity or experience. Thus, I was very conscientious not to interpose my process of cultural integration, college experiences, or background into the narratives of the participants.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, I was in a constant state of reflection throughout the data collection and analysis phases, in which I examined both myself as the researcher and how my identity, values, and assumptions may affect the research decisions and outcomes. This was especially important as an African immigrant, as I was cognizant not to assume a shared experience with the participants despite our commonalities. This aligns with the interpretivist paradigm I aimed to utilize, which accepts “subjectivity and the idea that research can result in different or 'multiple realities” (Greenback, 2003, p. 793). Relative to rigor, Horsburgh (2003) suggested that

Given that the researcher is intimately involved in both the process and product of the research enterprise, it is necessary for the reader to evaluate the extent to which an author identifies and explicates their involvement and its potential or actual effect upon the findings (p. 309).

Thus, the addition of the reflection documents not only helped me understand my role in the creation of knowledge, but also my biases as they could influence the meaning I make from the data. For example, I made note of moments in which students used phrases such as “you know how Habesha culture is” to recognize similarities in our experiences or heritage culture, while



also being aware to ask clarifying questions to prevent my assumptions and personal experiences from impacting the data analysis.

Berger (2015) outlined that the background of the researcher may affect “the way in which he or she... uses language, poses questions... and thus may shape the findings and conclusions of the study” (p.220); therefore, I attempted to approach the individual interviews as objectively as possible. In the interviews, I asked questions that did not attempt to lead students to a pre-determined response. For example, rather than ask students what cultural barriers they faced in their adjustment, I asked students to describe their culture and how it aligned with their host culture. In doing so, the participants were able to describe both the similarities and differences between the two cultures, and were then able to frame their responses to address their adjustment in their own words. Likewise, during the interview process I allowed the participants to share their experiences through open-ended questions, rather than guide the respondents through the lens of my experience as an African immigrant student. Additionally, during the coding process, I allowed the core themes to “emerge from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.12). In doing so, the students were able to define the themes in the study, in place of having me apply a theoretical construction to the data.

This study is about investigating individual life-experiences; therefore, my analyses foregrounded participants’ voices as way of maintaining interpretive validity. Moustaka (1994) outlines that, “verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on and analysis of the verbatim transcribed interviews and other material, and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy” (p. 33-34). Thus, after the interviews were transcribed and assigned with preliminary codes, I contacted certain participants for verification that I had

accurately interpreted their comments, which typically led to elaboration. For example, some of the participants discussed barriers to their social adjustment and racial tensions on campus somewhat vaguely. Likewise, when discussing diversity, a few of their participants did not elaborate on their unfamiliarity with diversity. Therefore, I conducted member checks with these informants to ensure that the conclusions of the study reflected the perceptions of the informants and also remain accessible to real migrant students.

Since how one's sense-making of responses and solutions is a product of individual history and personal and social culture, studies are inherently not objective (Eisner, 1992). I understand that my personal and professional experiences as an African immigrant student may interact with the data collected, thereby impacting the reliability of my data interpretations (Sherman, 2002). However, Burbules and Phillips (2000) contend that it is possible for a study to be externally influenced by "values to operate internally in a relatively objective manner," as long as external factors do not affect the internal workings" (p. 6). Therefore, I was mindful not to situate my own experiences within the context of the participants, so as not to distort how I made meaning of their experiences. To ensure that my subjective perspective did not 'contaminate' the data, I used reflection techniques, and asked participants for description, clarification, and examples in their responses. Thus, in using the students' voices to describe their experience, I attempted to prevent my values and perceptions from directly affecting the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All of the participants were treated in accordance to the ethical guidelines of the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB). Although there were no identifiable risks for participating in this study, a couple of considerations were kept in mind when dealing

with immigrant and international students. First, there was the possibility that the students may feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences or talking about personal information. Secondly, given that this study dealt with migrant students, there is the potential that participants may feel the pressure to answer all the questions designed for the interview, given that the researcher holds a position of power. However, all of these considerations were incorporated during the research design stage. Every caution was taken to ensure that the all participants felt safe, comfortable, and had the freedom to withdraw from the study if they felt the need to. However, no student withdrew or expressed concern during the study.

### **Limitations**

Being that this study asks students to examine their past high school, and earlier college, experiences they are required to be both retrospective and reflective. The study included three students who were recent university graduates, and 10 graduate students. Therefore, they had to be very reflective as they were called to describe events that occurred much earlier in their lives. For example, graduate students were asked to reflect and describe their high school preparation, and then asked how well it prepared them for the post-secondary system. In a similar vein, participants varied in the amount of years they have been in the U.S. Thus, immigrant students who have been in the U.S. for 15 or more years may have had more difficulty recalling both their home country, and their initial experiences of cultural transition. With increased time between the participants' current state and the past experience they are asked to recall, there runs increased risk that the respondents recollection may not precisely reflect their actual experience. Thus, the requirement of participants to be reflective may be a limitation, as respondents may be far removed from the original event/experience.

As discussed in the earlier sections, the study design aimed to include focus groups as a

secondary round of data collection to aid in the co-construction of ideas, and provide access to comparisons that focus group participants make between their experiences. Additionally, the focus group conversations would have offered the opportunity to hear what may be the commonalities within these students' experiences, as well as the distinct differences brought about by country of origin, immigration status, and years residing in the U.S. However, no participant in the study was willing to participate in a group dialogue due to feelings of discomfort. Although this is a potential limitation of the study, I feel the anonymity associated with individual interviews garnered increased trust and comfort with the interviewer. Therefore, students may have been more willing to share in-depth information about their experiences, without a fear of judgment by their peers. Likewise, a limitation of focus group data is the ability for group members to influence one another towards conformity or polarization (Turner Kelly, 2003; Morgan, 1997), which was avoided in this study.

The final limitation addresses the disproportionate amount of students from certain institutional types and African countries. Being that the sample was heavily influenced by my ability to connect and recruit participants, the sample procedure oversampled elite institutions. More specifically, 79% of the sample attended elite research institutions, thereby neglecting to address students at other types of institutions. Ergo, the study is limited in its ability to fully inform researchers and practitioners aiming to understand students at different types of higher education institutions. This is compounded by the disproportionate representation of students across the African countries, as students from Ethiopia were over-represented in the sample. While the majority of African international students stem from Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Cameroon, and Ethiopia (Institute of International Education, 2014), no student from South Africa participated in my study. Being that Africa does not represent one monolithic

culture, the study is limited in its exploration of African student adjustment to U.S. universities. This may be considered a limitation to the study; however, the goal of this study was not to generalize its findings to all African immigrant/international students, but rather gain a better understanding through the exploration of students' lived experiences. Nevertheless, the diversity of the sample in terms of country of origin, years in America, migration status, etc. may lead the findings to resonate with other African migrant students, thereby expanding the understanding of the African migrants students' experiences in U.S. colleges and universities.

#### **Chapter 4: Background Context: The Role of Social Class and Heritage Culture**

This chapter examines African immigrant and international students' backgrounds in relation to their socio-cultural adjustment to U.S. colleges/universities. The study's framework suggests background has an influence on the adjustment process of African immigrant and international students (Figure 4). As I examined this relationship, it became apparent not only that there were dramatic differences in the backgrounds of the two groups, immigrant and international students, but also that these differences had a substantial influence on students' cultural and academic preparation, college choice, and other factors that seemed determinant in the university adjustment process. Therefore, the first step for building an understanding of the migrant (immigrant & international) students' socio-cultural adjustment involves an examination of their background, as it sheds light on the "compatibility (or incompatibility) in cultural values, norms, attitudes and personality between the two cultural communities," which influences their adaptation (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 473). Analysis of students' narratives in this study revealed that social class and heritage culture were the main contextual influences on their adjustment.

First, I examine how the students' upbringing, via their familial background, influenced their decision to attend a U.S. institution, and potentially impacted their adjustment to the U.S. I compare immigrant and international students to illustrate the areas of difference between the two groups, while also shedding light on the role of socio-economic status on students' decisions, and motivations, to study in the U.S. Likewise, the influence of forced vs. voluntary migration status is discussed, as it played a role in both the students' willingness and ability to adjust to their new environment. Influences on the decision to study in the U.S. extend

the framework, as the students' motivations to study abroad may impact their interaction with the host society and culture.

Second, I also examine the students' cultural capital formation prior to entering the U.S. higher education system. This leads to an examination of how students' backgrounds may be associated with their post-secondary experiences, as students' backgrounds may work to prepare them for college in the U.S. Across the immigrant and international groups, a great deal of variation exists in the students' exposure to diverse cultures, academic preparation, and English exposure, which is directly associated with students' social class.

Lastly, I discuss the respondents' relationship to their heritage cultural values, and examine the cultural dissonance they have with western culture. While some international students had somewhat assimilated to western culture, due to their increased access to cultural capital, a great deal of similarities existed across groups. The chapter highlights the potential influence of background characteristics on students' preparation for their socio-cultural adjustment, demonstrating its role in facilitating (support) and hindering (barriers) their preparation for college in the U.S. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how these findings extend our understanding of African migrants students' adjustment into U.S. colleges and universities, and how the data expands the conceptual framework.

### **The Over-arching Role of Socio-Economic Status**

While a series of variables have been found to be associated with acculturation, socio-economic status is an important correlate of acculturation that has not been thoroughly examined in acculturation literature (Negy & Woods, 1992). Although acculturation research has discussed the potential role of SES on acculturative stress (Eustace, 2007), it is typically discussed in terms of financial hardship during the university experience. However, "to understand acculturation,

one must understand the interactional context in which it occurs” (Shwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p.5), which includes migrants’ socio-economic status and resources.

Therefore, this study adds to current literature by highlighting that SES may be associated with other resources that support both cultural adaptation and adjustment. The following table summarizes the participants’ socio-economic characteristics across immigrant and international groups, as SES was an important correlate of students’ preparation for the U.S. post-secondary system and environment. As is seen below, dramatic differences exist across the groups, with international students demonstrating a higher socio-economic status.



**Table 3. Socio-Economic & Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

Variable	Category	Participants	
		Immigrant Student	International Student
Reported Family Income	Low	0	0
	Low-Middle	13	2
	Middle	2	3
	High	0	8
Highest Degree Earned by parent(s)	No H.S. Degree	1	1
	High School	10	1
	Bachelors	2	2
	Masters	2	5
	Doctorate	0	4
First in Family to Study in the West	Yes	14	6
	No	1	7
Parental Occupation Sector	Labor	5	0
	Service	7	0
	Business	2	3
	Professional	1	9

As outlined in chapter 3, participants' unwillingness and/or inability to divulge familial income led to them to self classify into one of the income categories. Therefore, I looked at students' income classification, along with the other categories, in my examination of students' socio-economic status. The table highlights the disparities between immigrant and international students, with international students reporting higher family incomes, parental education levels, and parental occupations in the business and professional sectors. Likewise, nearly half of the

international students were not the first in their family to study in the U.S., thereby providing some students with early exposure to the west. This is important, as the following sections illustrate how increased familial resources (e.g. income and education) impacted students' decisions to study in the U.S., and afforded students with access to capital, thereby creating a foundation for their adjustment process.

### **Familial Decision-making**

While Africa does not represent a monolithic culture across nations, the collectivist nature of African countries centers on family. This resonated across both immigrant and international students, as participants revealed that a familial support system impacted their decision to study in the U.S. However, differences surfaced in relation to students' social class. More specifically, students with a higher socio-economic status, predominately international students, expressed a greater degree of parental influence on their decision. However, among students' with a lower SES, the majority of immigrant students, familial influence was linked to a desire to overcome financial barriers.

**International students.** The choice to study abroad is often a family decision that includes multiple decision makers, of which parental figures play a particularly strong role (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This notion resonated with every international student in this study, as parental figures played a vital role in the decision to study in the U.S. When asked about their decision to pursue their education in the U.S., several respondents outlined that studying in their home country was never a consideration, because their parents instilled the importance of a western education early on. This was especially relevant among international students who were not the first person in their family to study in the West. For example, Nicole discussed that her sibling's decision to study in the U.S. set an expectation for her to do so.

“I knew I was going to come to the U.S. for college... because I had a brother who was in the U.S. for school so, so I expected to come to the U.S.”

In a similar vein, Danny discussed the influence of his siblings on this decision.

“It was always a given that I would eventually go abroad and study. I think it’s just because I’m the last of five, and all of my brothers and sisters did it, so it was like when you’re done you’re definitely going, it was either Canada or the U.S., I guess it was implied.”

Beyond the more subtle influence of siblings’ decisions, students even adhered to their parents’ desire for them to study abroad when it ran counter to their personal desire. David revealed that even though he sought to study in Addis Ababa, his father’s insistence to study at his current university led him to study there.

R: My dad is actually the one who uh pushed me to go to here”

I: And why was that?

R: I don’t know he just likes it I guess.

I: Okay so were you considering going to school in your home country?

R: Yeah right there in Addis

I: Okay so your dad was the big motivating factor that pushed you to go to America.

R: Yeah very

I: Where you every reluctant to come?

R: Yeah...”

Not only are Danny, Nicole, and David not the first in their family to study-abroad, but they also stem from households in which their father obtained at least a Masters degree. In addition to higher levels of academic training, their fathers had exposure to internationalism through either

study-abroad or their work within an international organization (U.N). Therefore, parental background may have prompted the students' older siblings to study-abroad, through the transmission of knowledge acquired from parental experiences with internationalism. Thus, parental educational experiences may have an indirect role in the international students' decisions.

While greater family wealth was associated with encouragement towards study abroad among the international students, Gale's narrative demonstrates the impact of a lower socio-economic status on this association. After the death of her parents, Gale revealed that the burden of funding her education in Kenya prompted her to apply for scholarships to study in the U.S.

“And my whole ambition to pursue higher education outside of the country was mostly propelled by the fact that she passed away and my dad passed away, and regardless of the amount of wealth they hand, I would not be able to afford my fully fledged funded education in Kenya, so it would be easier to apply for a scholarship and come abroad. So it had mostly to do with financial reasons, I would like to say it was purely vision, but I really thought about the whole process of putting the financial burden on my parents, my legal guardians, to educate me and my younger brother.”

Unlike the majority of international students in the study, Gale did not come from a wealthy family prior to migrating to the U.S. Therefore, the idea of pursuing a post-secondary degree in her home country was not financially feasible, especially when she had a younger brother who was approaching college age. Despite having a mother who received her Masters degree from Cambridge, Gale revealed that the motivation to study abroad surfaced after her parents passing. Thus, finances played a unique role in Gale's decision to pursue her degree in the U.S., as study abroad was her only avenue to pursue a post-secondary degree.

Danny, Nicole, David, and Gale's sentiments provide a counter narrative to the notion that international students are voluntary immigrants (those relocating solely for personal desires). More specifically, this narrative of familial pressure to study abroad classifies these students as involuntary immigrants. Therefore, as involuntary immigrants, these students may experience acculturation without actively seeking it out (Berry & Sam, 1997). For example, when Danny, Nicole, and David, who stem from a higher socio-economic status, discussed moving to the U.S., they outlined that their primary intent was to meet the academic expectations of their family. Even in Gale's narrative, studying in the U.S. was her only real opportunity to further her education, as a foreign scholarship provided the only means to finance her education. Thus, the study abroad experience was restricted to the academic sphere. This may then lead international students to only prepare for the academic domain of the study abroad experience, thereby neglecting the cultural shift of their new environment.

**Immigrant students.** A high degree of familial decision making also resonated among immigrant students, with respondents revealing that parental figures influenced their decision on their major. Kane, a 4<sup>th</sup> year immigrant student from Cameroon, vocalized his father's push for him to study in the U.S.

"So after finishing high school, I was doing like, I had a technical background, because my dad was really you know he wanted you know the best for us, so he specifically chose, that if you want to pursue specific fields in life, all of us had a technical background. So I was in the engineering field."

Upon graduating high school, Kane pursued an engineering degree in his home country. However, dissatisfied with the quality of education he was receiving, Kane's father insisted that he continue his schooling in the west. Unlike the prior international students, Kane's father had

neither a post-secondary degree nor experience traveling abroad. However, through the recommendation of a friend he encouraged his son to study in the U.S. Motivated by his father's desire, and ability to fund his education, Kane pursued an opportunity to move in with his sister in America, where he continues to study engineering. While Kane chose not to disclose the avenue by which he came to the U.S., similar to the narratives of international students, his primary intent was to migrate for a post-secondary education. Therefore, Kane's narrative illustrates that parental agency in the study-abroad decision extends to immigrant students, and can even materialize later in the students' life. With earlier research demonstrating an association among voluntary/involuntary migration, cultural adaptation, and academic difficulties, this study brings to light the impact of familial influence on this association (Ogbu, 1993; Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000).

Among immigrant students with lower socio-economic statuses, parental desires also impacted the college decision process. Students revealed that coming from an impoverished country led their parents to migrate to the U.S. in hopes of their children pursuing a post-secondary degree. Furthermore, upon migration, witnessing the grueling demands of the labor force further prompted students' desires to attend college in the U.S. For example, Zaid discussed the influence of her mother's job as a housekeeper on her college choice decision.

“ You know my mom works as a housekeeper in one of those casinos, and not only is the job nasty, but the people are nasty to her. You know she gets talked down to and then has to be silent as she does back breaking work. She's come home in pain, come home crying, all because she didn't have a chance to get an education back home. Now I'm here, I have family back home who lives off less than a one hundred dollars a month, like I've seen real poverty, not what they call it here. It's like I have to go to college, I'm in

the U.S., that's why my parents brought us here, going to school and making something of ourselves was the whole point."

Having witnessed the detrimental effects of a lack of education first hand, Zaid discussed her family's role on her college choice. The harsh conditions that her family members face, reinforce her obligation to attend college in the U.S. Therefore, there is both a self-imposed and familial pressure to take advantage of opportunities not afforded to others in her family.

Similar to the international students, Zaid and Kane's narratives reveal that a high degree of familial decision-making was present in immigrant students' post-secondary decisions. However, Kane was the only immigrant student in the study whose parent pushed him to study in the U.S., despite currently residing in his home country. Yet, this may be explained by his socio-economic status, as Kane came from a middle class upbringing that afforded him the opportunity to study in the U.S. His experience resonates with the majority of international students, as their higher socio-economic status enabled their parents to push students' toward a western education early on. Similarly, Gale's experience resonates with that of the immigrant students, as a lower socio-economic status and/or familial hardships are what fostered a desire for higher education in the U.S.

**Cross cutting analysis.** The role of socio-economic status on familial decision-making resonated across immigrant and international groups. International students with a high SES discussed a strong push from their parents to study abroad, even when it ran counter to their initial desires. Kane, one of two immigrant students to come from a middle-income family, also revealed the influence of his father's instance on a U.S. degree. However, among the lower income students, financial barriers were the primary motivators to pursue college in the U.S. Low income immigrants, and one international student, discussed their lack of familial resources

as their push towards higher education. Thus, SES had an indirect role on the relationship between familial influence and pursuing a degree in the U.S.

### **Social Class and Cultural Capital Formation**

While study abroad has been used as a mechanism to acquire both social and cultural capital (de Lourdes Villarreal, 2014), the type of capital that students have prior to their migration may influence the outcomes of their post-secondary experience. Bourdieu (1977) discussed the impact of inherited cultural capital (the tastes, references, or norms of the dominant class) as it pertains to educational outcomes. However, cultural capital also has a strong influence on cultural adaptation (Schönpflug, 2008). More specifically, increased cultural capital has been associated with successful integration among immigrant students (Schönpflug, 2008). This resonates with both the international and immigrant students in this study, who discussed the role of cultural capital on their adaptation. Yet, differences in access to capital aligned with variations in students' socio-economic upbringing.

### **International Exposure**

Early exposure to the differing cultures may aid in students' ability to adapt to a new environment by making students less prone to culture shock. Within the study, international students were the only participants to have experience traveling abroad prior to entering the U.S. This is associated with their higher social class, as students' had the familial wealth to fund international exposure. As revealed in their narratives, international exposure provided international students with a degree of preparation for the culture of their university environment. However, as lower income students, immigrant students did not have access to this level of international preparation.

**International students.** Parental investments have been strongly linked to socio-cultural



adjustment levels, as parental resources can “facilitate the penetration into and interaction with mainstream society...” (Negy & Woods, 1992, p. 248). This resonated with the international student narratives, as participants revealed that familial resources helped them to develop a sense of cultural competency prior to their arrival in the U.S. For example, Abraham, a fourth-year international student from Kenya, discussed the influence of international travel prior to arriving in the U.S.

“To be honest, I didn’t experience much of a culture shock. I’ve traveled to other countries before so I knew what to expect.”

Likewise, Nicole, a 4<sup>th</sup> year international student from Ghana, stated

“I felt prepared for college, because it was a breeze, and making friends wasn’t an issue. I think it was because I was used to different cultures.”

In a similar vein, David, a 4<sup>th</sup> year international student from Ethiopia, discussed an international conference his parents had funded for him.

“Oh I was uh part of this global youth leadership conference, GYOC, that really, that really gives you a uh, a better experience like what a college life would feel like... I can’t remember where it was, I think it was in New York; it was like when I was 15 or 16 so I don’t remember too much. But it really prepared us for college; we lived in the dorm for two weeks or so.”

Similar to nearly every international student in this study (except for Gale), Abraham, Nicole, and David had prior experience traveling abroad. Through these experiences, the students discussed their interactions with people of different cultures, and exposure to new languages, as preparation for their college experience. However, the context of the exposure is an important facet to address, as Jenny visited the U.S. on a work related matter later in her adulthood.

Although she traveled to the U.S. 3-4 times prior to migrating for her education, she had minimal interaction with the environment.

“I would come here for three week or two weeks, and I’m involved meetings with my boss and other partners, and it was just short, short uh trips. I didn’t get much of the U.S. so I can’t say those trips I learned a lot about the U.S.”

Therefore, upon migrating she revealed feeling unprepared for the “culture shock” that she experienced. The importance of more in-depth exposure is also illuminated in David’s narrative, as early access to the U.S. university environment further enabled him to gain a glimpse of the U.S. post-secondary environment prior to his arrival. In doing so, he later discussed the impact that it had on his level of comfort once he moved into the dorms his freshman year. David’s experience resonated with those students who had a parent with study abroad experience, as Nicole, Kali, and Simon all mentioned having prior academic experiences in the U.S., and being prepared for the cultural diversity of their host environment. This may indicate that students whose parents studied abroad understood the importance of early exposure to the U.S. academic setting, thereby priming students to pursue their post-secondary education in another country. Thus, parental experiences with study abroad may be associated with international students’ cultural preparation.

**Immigrant students.** None of the African immigrant students in this study vocalized experience traveling abroad prior to migrating to the U.S. Therefore, unlike the international students, the majority of immigrant students discussed having minimal understanding of the United States prior to their arrival. For example, when asked about any experiences that helped her to gain an understanding of the U.S., Lacy, a second year immigrant student from Ethiopia, stated:

“R: Not about helping us understand here...I believe it was like highly disproportionate of what America was said to be, it was over amplified, and it was not as brought up as they said it was here.

I: What were they saying exactly?

R: Um, people you know they thought it was, it was what the other outside world the perfect country, with the apple pie family, with the white picket fence, but it was more different than that. Everybody lives differently; we didn't, because we lived in a country that was not enslaved I guess we did not know the cultural diversity or racism and other things happen, so it was a different experience.”

Similar to the other immigrant students, Lacy discussed being unprepared for the social and cultural aspects of the U.S. This was especially true in relation to race, as she was unfamiliar with the racial dynamics in America. Lacking any exposure to the west, she revealed that her perceptions of America were based on ideals that were spread by those in her country. Therefore, upon migrating she was confronted with unmet expectations and a great deal of unfamiliarity.

Beyond feelings of unpreparedness, the influence of early international exposure on culture shock was also demonstrated in the narratives of immigrant students. For example, Kay, a second year immigrant student from Mali, stated:

“I didn't really have contacts with people from other countries, especially foreigners, so I was very sheltered, so it was kind of a big culture shock since coming to the United States.”

While Kay's father came to the U.S. when she was young, she remained in Mali until she was 12. Even after being in the country for several years, Kay still experiences culture shock. Unlike the international students in this study, whose initial experiences traveling to the U.S. and Europe

were temporary, Kay's initial feeling of discomfort still permeates through her college experience. This may illustrate that a smooth transition into the U.S. may be better facilitated if students are given some preparation beforehand.

**Comparison.** The added difficulty of transitioning to a new country may further prompt psychological distress. Yet, information about the cultural norms and behaviors of a new environment may allow anticipatory adjustment to take place, whereby students decrease their level of uncertainty about cultural norms (Selmer, 2002). Therefore, for the majority of international students who are afforded the opportunity to travel abroad prior to their arrival in the U.S., they gained a sense of cultural capital that not only prompts a greater degree of global competency, but also served as a support mechanism for their study-abroad experience. However, for immigrant students, their lack of exposure to diverse cultures or groups prior to migration led to sentiments of culture shock. For some immigrants, these feelings of culture shock continued years after migrating to the U.S, which may be explained by their homogenous home environments in the U.S. The findings also illuminate the importance of the context behind the exposure, and the potential role of parental, academic, and financial resources on the association between international exposure and cultural preparation. In that, international students with a higher socio-economic status, in the form of higher parental education levels and income, were afforded with exposure to internationalism.

### **Cross-Cultural Knowledge**

Bourdieu's (1986) examination of cultural capital encompasses the accumulation and transmission of knowledge across generations. Within the study, international students revealed the avenues by which their parents instilled them with cultural knowledge. More specifically, through exposure to diversity, international students gained a sense of cultural competence that

inhibited culture shock upon entering the U.S. However, a lack of access to such exposure by immigrants left them unprepared for their new environment.

**International students.** In addition to international exposure, parental resources enabled international students to gain access to cultural capital within their home country. For example, Nicole stated:

“I feel like the entire time my family had been preparing me to deal with different cultures and all of that growing up...the exposure to different cultures was good for us. He thought, it would expose us to different countries too. I remember, I didn’t leave the country 2007, I was about 14 years old I went to South Africa and my cousins lived there so we lived with them. It was a mind-blowing experience for me, because Ghana was all I knew. Thereafter we went to London, we got to see there also, it was very mind blowing. Every experience to travel I definitely embrace, every chance to travel I do, because of my upbringing that my parents gave me. Um, my dad had a couple of international friends, and people who work with, and come to the house. And you know Ghana has a couple of Chinese restaurants, and Indian restaurants, and all that, so we were definitely exposed to other cultures in terms of food, and you know the music we listened to...My parents also traveled a lot on their own, sometimes without us, so you know we hear about their experiences, pictures all over that we can look at and aspire to travel to, places I can travel to and stuff.”

Nicole stemmed from what she described as a “well-off” family. She revealed that her father studied abroad in the U.K., and discussed it as a very transformative experience. The study abroad experience, along with a great deal of traveling among her parents, equipped Nicole’s parents with a great deal of cultural knowledge about diverse groups. This cultural knowledge

was transferred to Nicole in the form of narratives and consistent exposure to diverse groups and countries. Therefore, Nicole's experiences helped her to develop a level of cross-cultural competence (a set of attitudes, knowledge, and practices), which enables students to function effectively in cross-cultural situations (Banks, 2012). Cultural competence includes components such as cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, and cultural acceptance, which are attained and upheld through experiences with diversity. Hence, Nicole's narrative revealed her ability to "deal" with different cultures, thereby lessening the degree of culture shock upon her arrival to the U.S. Thus, the cultural capital that Nicole has acquired has potentially eased her transition into the U.S., and created a foundation for her socio-cultural adjustment.

**Immigrant students.** Differences between international and immigrant students were also revealed in discussions about cultural capital prior to coming to the U.S. For example, Gwen, an immigrant graduate student from Mali, discussed having minimal exposure to diverse cultures or groups.

I: Did you have academic or other social experiences that provided you with an opportunity to have an understanding of the United States, including its culture and educational system prior to coming to the United States?

R: Prior to coming to the U.S.

I: Yes.

R: No, I mean in the sense of academic wise absolutely not. You know the continent is I mean I can speak on Ghana perspective. I mean you saw white people come to Ghana and that was it socially, you saw white people...In the kids neighborhood the kid would play back in the day Céline Dion, Whitney Houston. Slightest introduction to the American

culture, but in that sense I had, I think I saw like one or two white people back home and that was it; but no, no preparation just got dropped into it.

Similar to the majority of immigrant students in the study, the only exposure Gwen had to other cultural groups, prior to coming to the U.S., had been through media outlets. Hence, she lacked any cultural knowledge that would have prepared her for her arrival to the U.S. Thus, Gwen was vulnerable to experiencing cultural shock, as she was completely unaware of the values, behaviors, or norms of the American culture. In addition to a lack of cultural knowledge on the U.S., Gwen also had no prior experience interacting with diverse groups. A lack of cross-cultural communication weakens the student's capacity to interact with diverse students and function effectively in a diverse environment (Banks, 2012). Therefore, upon migrating to the U.S., a lack of American cultural understanding may create barriers to socio-cultural adjustment.

While the majority of immigrant students had minimal understanding of western culture, within group differences did surface as a function of socio-economic status. More specifically, Kane, one of two immigrant students who did not come from a lower income family, discussed being exposed to knowledge from different countries through his father's publishing business.

"So when I was in high school my dad import so many novels, you know, you know big novels, like Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, and all these novels. But they have a scaled version of these novels that are meant for maybe high school students and stuff like that, that is really small that you can read in a day. So he bought so many of them, and I was the one supplying those books to schools, so I read a lot of those books. So I knew about so many countries, ...I we had foreign TV stations, specifically CNN and Aljazeera so those were news channels I watched from my dad, because my dad watched a lot of news. And then for each news article that I write on my notebook, I think each news

article was like I think 25 cents or something like that for pocket money...those were the advantage I had before coming here, because I had a better understanding of the world you know, so I knew about so many countries.”

Through his father’s company, Kane was introduced to literature that exposed him to different nations. His desire to expand his understanding of the global society was reinforced by his father, who motivated him to increase his knowledge base of the west. Therefore, unlike the majority of immigrant students, Kane migrated to the U.S. with some understanding of the west. However, this understanding may be superficial, as Kane discussed literature and news sources as helping him to gain a better understanding of the world more so than providing cultural insight.

**Comparison.** Cultural capital consists of a set of knowledge or competencies that individuals may then use as a tool or resource throughout life (Bourdieu, 1986). The international students’ narratives reveal that through exposure to differing cultures, they garnered a type of cultural competency that helped them navigate their interactions with diverse groups and in new environments. Beyond exposure to multiculturalism, the experiences of family members served as a form of cultural transmission, as international students gained insight on new cultures from their parents’ experiences abroad. However, access to cultural knowledge was superficial for lower income immigrants, as media outlets were their primary insight into western culture. Thus, the ability to obtain cultural knowledge among students was a factor of their familial resources.

### **High School Exposure to Diversity**

Research suggests that constant interaction with students from different cultural backgrounds, “can lead to decreased intergroup anxiety and increased positive intercultural attitudes between majority and minority groups” (Williams, & Johnson, 2011, p.42). This resonated with international students, as they discussed their high schools as a platform for



intercultural exchange. More specifically, the majority of international students attended private and/or international schools that were comprised of diverse students and faculty. This differed from immigrant narratives, as none of the immigrant students described their high school as diverse, or gaining a new sense of cultural awareness in school. While being thrown into a diverse environment for the first time may lead to feelings of discomfort experienced by those trying to adjust to life in a new culture (Boafo-Arthur, 2014), the international students reveal how their early exposure to diversity at the secondary level helped them to adapt to diverse environments.

**International students.** Among the participants in the study, a higher socio-economic status was associated with increased exposure to diversity. The majority of international respondents revealed that their elite high schools exposed them to a multi-cultural learning environment, thereby preparing them for the diversity they would experience in the U.S. For example, Simon, an international graduate student from Ethiopia, discussed the diversity of his high school.

“My high school was pretty much had um, I would say um, 55% Ethiopians and 35% percent international students. My teachers were mostly international, I wouldn’t say specifically from one country, they were kind of from all over the place. Mainly teachers that had experienced teaching in other international countries, so we had a couple of African teachers, couple of European teachers, we had two American teachers, and I believe our principle was a British guy, um so my school was pretty diverse. We had different events such as cultural day, international day, and stuff where people bring their own ethnic foods and stuff, so we got to taste a lot of other people’s foods.”

Similar to many of the other international students in this study, Simon attended a private school with a diverse student body and academic faculty. Beyond exposure to diverse groups, Simon's high school also encouraged students to learn about, and engage with, different cultures. This introduction to multiculturalism at the secondary level may have prepared students for the diverse settings at U.S. post-secondary institutions, as Sammy later outlined having no difficulty adapting to U.S. culture. Therefore, upon migration these students may be less likely to experience culture shock.

International experiences support students' growth from an ethnocentric perspective towards an ethnorelative perspective, which allows for adaptation and acceptance of increased forms of diversity (Anderson & Lawton, 2011). These experiences may then lead to a greater degree of openness toward diverse perspectives, while also helping students work towards decreased levels of hostility and stereotyping of minority groups. Subsequently, increased levels of openness allows for "students to socialize, learn, and develop among others of a different race, ethnicity, and culture" (Antonio, 1998, p.1). This resonated with the international students' narratives, as Nicole revealed that the diversity of her high school prompted diverse thought.

"I went to international school, so growing up middle school was an international school...we had um, generally open-minded kids, whose parents were sort of well to do also, and had exposed them to different cultures. So you know the conversations were not only Ghanaian orientated, people had different experiences."

Nicole divulged that from an early age, she was exposed to diverse cultures and perspectives in her academic environment. Increased levels of diversity within the teaching and learning environment allows for intellectual diversity with the classroom, which in turn helps students to move beyond their dualistic frame of thinking. Through classroom dialogue, students are

introduced to differing perspectives and competing ideas, and as a result they are given a platform to “form their own grounded judgments about the relative value of competing perspectives” (AACU, 2006, p.10). Once students move towards a conceptual framework that opens them up to alternative ways of thinking, the classroom becomes more tolerant of differing views. Likewise, differing perspectives may challenge students’ prior conceptions of truth and force them to critically analyze or re-evaluate their prior positions. Therefore, prior to their migration to the U.S., students who attended more diverse high schools may face less difficulty adapting to the diverse academic culture of U.S. universities.

**Immigrant students.** While 87% (n=13) of the immigrant students had some secondary experience in the U.S., none of these students discussed their high school as a diverse learning environment. However, this may be associated with students’ high school demographics, as the majority of participants attended a high school where one racial/ethnic group was the majority. See Table 4 below for the racial demographics for the immigrants attending school in the U.S.

**Table 4. U.S. High School Racial Demographics (N=15)**

Variable	Category	Participants
		Immigrant
High School Experience in the U.S	Yes	13
U.S. High School Minority Enrollment	>70%	11
	50<X<70%	1
	>30%	1
	Not Applicable	2
Racial Composition	White (42-66%)	2
	Hispanic (46-50%)	2
	Hispanic (>51%)	9
	Not Applicable	2

Among immigrant students, 80% (n=12) attended minority high schools, of which 73% (n=11) were predominately Hispanic. Therefore, despite a high proportion of minority students, the schools' composition was not ethnically/racially diverse. This may have prompted students to form ethnic enclaves within their high school. This is furthered by students' narratives, as the majority of immigrants discussed self-segregating into culturally similar groups in high school. Thus, students' high school composition may explain the lack of discussion on diverse interactions at the secondary level.

**Comparison.** While the majority of immigrant students had some secondary experience in the U.S., none of them mentioned being exposed to diversity in high school, prior or post migration. However, this may be explained by the fact that all the immigrant students attended lower-resourced public schools in their home country, and maintained a lower income status

upon migration. Therefore, the majority attended racially and socio-economically homogenous schools in the U.S., which may have limited their access to diversity. This was compounded by the fact that immigrant students discussed their primary high school peer groups as other co-nationals. However, coming from a higher socio-economic status, international students' were able to attend racially and culturally diverse high schools in their home country. Furthermore, diversity was celebrated in these private schools, as students were encouraged to share aspects of their culture with one another. Thus, the international students' narratives further support the notion that increased diversity among student populations heightens the level of openness and understanding of diverse people through increased interaction among diverse groups of students (Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2007).

## **Uplift**

As discussed in the earlier sections, the “theoretical assumptions inherent in Academic Capital Formation, is that transitioning into college may hold the key to social uplift for entire groups of people” (Paulsen & Smart, 2013, p.112). This resonated in this study, as studying in the U.S. was seen as the primary pathway to uplift. Despite the students' socio-economic background, their narratives revealed that coming from a third world country fueled their desire to persist at an American university. However, among international students, an American degree was seen as an avenue to garner the necessary expertise for the competitive job market. Yet, immigrant students discussed going to college in the U.S. as an avenue to increasing development in their home country and relieving their families of financial hardship. Therefore, while international students perceived a degree from the U.S. as an opportunity to uplift their individual status, immigrants focused more on communal financial circumstances.

**International students.** Student mobility is a mechanism for economic uplift, as the perceived prestige of foreign degrees tends to enhance the academic credentials and employment opportunities in one's home country and abroad (Varghese, 2008). Therefore, the commercial value of a foreign degree, and international work-experience, has encouraged students to seek higher education abroad. Daisy, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year international student from Rwanda, discussed the influence of prestige on her decision to study abroad.

“...it's about the credibility that the American college system has really world-wide. In the sense that I could take you know my college degree from the U.S. and it will be held credible in whatever part of the world I'm in. As opposed to for instance, if I want to work in a certain country you know a degree of a continent they don't even know about, it's just one of those harsh realities. It's the credibility, and what also secondly I wanted, I am keen on going back to my country as soon as I graduate...”

Similar to the other international students, Daisy vocalized a desire to return to her home country for employment. However, she understands the value placed on studying abroad. Determined to be competitive in the global job market, Daisy sought to complete her education in the U.S. This intrinsic motivation may have also played a role in her adaptation, as the desire for economic uplift may have garnered increased willingness to acculturate to the university setting. Research has outlined the positive association between acculturation and career aspirations, as orientation to the Anglo culture is positively related to problem-solving capabilities, career self-efficacy, and academic goals (Rivera, Chen, Flores, Blumber, & Ponterotto, 2007). Thus, similar to the study abroad experience itself, acculturating into the dominant culture may have been viewed as an avenue to reach their academic and career aspirations.

**Immigrant students.** While all the international students vocalized their desire to return to their home country, several immigrant students revealed their plans to return to their home country to further societal development. Kane is an example of an immigrant student who discussed his motivation to study in the U.S. in terms of communal uplift.

“... to acquire knowledge to help my country back home, and the way for me to, I couldn't implement those things, the dream that I have I couldn't implement those dreams without an education, so an education was the most important thing for me to acquire to implement those dreams and wishes. I'm still pursuing it, I still needs those education to refine you know the knowledge, to refine the ideas I have, because acquired knowledge, I realize some of my ideas were unrealistic. So I needed more knowledge to actually scale down my ideas that I had, the ideas I had when I was a kid of what I wanted to do to you know my society. So I am still pursing those goals...”

Kane had an inherent desire to help in the technological development of his home country. However, he understood that in order to do so, he needed formal training to turn his dreams into a reality. As a fourth-year student, he revealed that his education in the U.S. has allowed him to both scale down his ideas and materialize them into realistic goals. Additionally, he discussed his education as a mechanism for Cameroon's development, thereby instilling a sense of social responsibility upon himself. Kane's discussion of his future graduation plans highlights the obligation he felt to his country's uplift.

“My main objective is to obtain capital and open my own business and stuff like that back home that is going to help people you know try to provide education for people at a cost-effective way. ... the educational institution have to make them more effective by integrating new technologies, the technologies have lengthen America, you know the

educational system, how do I integrate that system into the infrastructure that we already have to make them more effective, that you know, that we have limitation of space you know... Because that is the only way you can get development in the country, so until, until, as one of the main objectives is to go into manufacturing you know, we have to get the goal of all the basic necessities that we need. So if we, if we lead in our own manufacturing that is what will help us. I would have to be mostly in the agricultural sector we have to secure our food, we have to secure our food, because that is the main necessity that the human needs for survival...”

Kane outlines that the poor technological infrastructure in Cameroon is a result of a lack luster educational system. His experience in the U.S. allowed him to understand the importance of integrating technology into the educational system, which he aims to implement in his home country. Despite being an immigrant student, Kane seeks to return to his home country. His continuous use of the word “we” when referring to the people of Cameroon suggests a shared identity and a familial connection to those of his homeland. Therefore, throughout his education, his goals for his country remain in his purview. This theme resonated with other participants, as immigrant students’ discussed a desire to return to their home country and contribute to development

In addition to contributing to the development in his home country, Bill revealed that his desire to return to Ethiopia is influenced by the fact that he felt he would be more valued in his home country.

“R: I finally want to move back to Africa and be able to do something for the community there. Because I feel like, I feel like that I am more valued out there than here.

I: And why do you think that is?



R: Why I'm more valued out there, the first thing there's a lot of scholars out here, I might not matter out here that much, but I matter there, because there are not scholars out there...I would do more things there, not just because of the culture difference, just there are not a lot of people who have the skill and education to teach that's why.

Bill revealed that his home country lacks experienced engineering professionals that could contribute to the country's growth in the field. This contrasts drastically with America, in which he felt that as a scholar he would just be another "face in the crowd." Bill felt that as an Ethiopian immigrant, the cultural differences might lead him to be undervalued, and inhibit him from adding to the field. Therefore, his intrinsic desire to contribute to growth and development prompts his desire to return to Ethiopia. Bill and Kane's desire to return to their home country resonates with the transitional nature of international students in the U.S. Thus, these immigrants may be less inclined to integrate into the university culture, as not only is their stay temporary, but their interaction with the university environment may be restricted to the academic sphere.

Beyond societal development, a U.S. education was also discussed in terms of familial and individual uplift. When asked about her motivation to further her education in the U.S., Lacy discussed her desire to pursue a degree in the U.S. to provide her family with a better future.

"The future of like a better life, of your parents saying they want a better life ... and of course you want a life where we could support ourselves, and eventually go back home so we can stay there, and become productive members of society"

Lacy understood her parents' background, and their inability to sustain financial security due to a lack of education. Studying in the U.S. not only provided her with the opportunity to support herself, but she also viewed it as a mechanism to support her family. Therefore, the desire to return to her home country and contribute to society reinforces the narrative that a U.S. education

provides an avenue for familial and societal uplift.

**Comparison.** Pursing a degree in the U.S. for the purpose of societal, familial, and individual uplift may have garnered increased persistence for the students' acculturation and college adjustment process. While across immigrant and international groups, familial culture created a commitment to educational uplift, students' desire for uplift may have been impacted by their background. Low-income immigrants were the only ones to discuss education in the U.S. as a means for communal uplift. This aligns with their socio-economic status, as growing up in a low-income and under-resourced community, both in their home country and the U.S., may have driven students to support educational and financial uplift across generations (St. John, Hu, Fisher, 2010). Therefore, the international student focus on individual uplift may be explained by their more privileged upbringing, as their families do not depend on them for future financial security.

### **Academic Preparation**

Similar to the previous sections, the impact of students' socio-economic status resurfaces in students' academic preparation prior to starting college. Table 5, below highlights the differences in students' high school characteristics.

**Table 5. High School Characteristics of the Sample**

Variable	Category	Participants	
		Immigrant	International
Private/ Public High School	Private	1	12
	Public	14	1
Type of High School System	Home Country	10	3
	French		1
	British		6
	American	13	1
	Turkish		1
Economically Disadvantaged Student population	>50%	11	
	25>X>50%	1	
	>10%	1	

As demonstrated in Table 5, the majority of international students attended private high schools with a western-based curriculum. Among the immigrant students, 87% (n=13) of the students had some high school experience in the U.S., with 33% (n=5) having attended high school solely in the U.S, and 13% (n=2) attended secondary school solely in their home country. Additionally, 73% (n=11) of immigrant students attended high schools in the U.S. with more than 50% of the student population on free/reduced lunch. In the examination of students' high school experiences, the narratives revealed differences in access to capital across the two groups.

**International students.** Despite the perceived prestige of a U.S. education, the majority of international participants revealed that the rigor of the educational system in their home country supported their post-secondary academic adjustment. This further illustrates the role of socio-economic status, as access to elite private schools further propelled the international

students' preparation for schooling in the U.S. For example, Daisy discussed the preparation her high school provided her with.

“I was used to the rigor of school because again the standards in high school were so much higher than any other high school. So I was really used to putting in 12 hour long work days, and in that aspect it wasn't a surprise in that sense, because we took the Cambridge system which was the UK system”

The impact of a western-influenced or international curriculum was also revealed in Danny's narrative.

“So the French system is really hard, I think that's probably why I really didn't have good grades, but I'll say prepared me pretty well, cause um. By the time you're done with what we call blac, which is the international baccalaureate, or whatever you call it, you're pretty much done with the first year of college here when it comes to math and physics. So I'd say we're pretty well, I don't know pretty prepared for college.”

Nearly every international student in this study (except for Jenny) discussed attending an elite private or boarding high school, the majority of which were taught with a British, French, or American based system. Therefore, similar to the other international participants, both Daisy and Danny revealed that the academic rigor of their elite secondary school provided a strong foundation for their post-secondary coursework. Danny's narrative also illustrated that his secondary-school performance was not an accurate predictor of post-secondary performance, as the difficulty of his high school curriculum familiarized him with the core math and science concepts of his first year. However, this did not resonate with all the participants, as Daisy discussed inconsistencies between the American and British educational systems hindered her preparation.

“ ... it was different, it was different in the way that you know I didn’t understand for instance what it takes to write a good essay, because the standards like with Cambridge you really don’t have to write essays. I think the subjects I took, the electives I took and so I wasn’t prepared academically in that sense, but I was prepared to be able to put in the work, and so that’s where I stood coming into college yeah.”

Within higher education, it is assumed that the “academic integration, that is the extent to which students adapt to the academic way-of-life (Tinto 1975), of international students is not well-aligned with the requirements of higher educational institutes” (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsvredriet, & Kommers, 2012, p.686). While Daisy’s experience illustrated the misalignment between the educational requirements in her home country and the preparation necessary for the U.S post-secondary system, this did not resonate with all the respondents. Thus, while elite international schools provided students with a rigorous education, students may encounter setbacks due to the lack of concentration in certain subject areas.

**Immigrant students.** A students’ decision to migrate to another country for the pursuit of a postsecondary education is multi-faceted and involves a variety of internal and external factors. A majority of these factors are associated with what is referred to as the “push/pull” phenomenon (Altbach, 2004; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). In that, “students are “pushed” out when their home nations lack postsecondary institutions that match their social and academic needs, and pulled to other nations for their postsecondary educational endeavors” (de Lourdes Villarreal, 2014, p.128). This resonated with Solomon, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year immigrant student from Ethiopia, who highlighted both the deficiencies in Ethiopia’s educational system and the strengths of the American educational system.

“The education is really good, because back home it’s really theory, all you do is learn

theory in the classroom, but here you actually, like you are able to go to the lab, and you know do what you learn in the classroom, by taking textbook and learning theory in real-life. So education-wise I really like it, that's why like, back home I used to have a C in math, I used to bad in math, because all they do is they just, they don't even like explain it good, and sometimes they don't even understand it. Like I took calculus back in high school, not that I was good at it, but if you're in 12<sup>th</sup> grade everybody takes calculus, so I took differential calculus, and integral calculus in high school. So sometimes the teacher would start a problem, like we would go to the library and do problems, and we would say hey we didn't understand this can you explain, sometimes they can't even explain that stuff, so it's really hard for them to explain things that they don't even understand. But here, they know what they're talking about, even if you ask them they can prove it, I like the education style I definitely like it."

Solomon immigrated to America in his senior year of high school, and discussed the increase in educational resources and teacher expertise as a strength of America's educational style. Similar to the other immigrant students in this study, Solomon did not stem from a wealthy background. Therefore, unable to attend an elite private school, he received his secondary education in a school with limited resources and ill-equipped teachers. Despite the limited resources, Solomon revealed that the academic preparation he received in Ethiopia was superior to his high school experience in the U.S.

"I think what prepared me for college was my experience back home. My experience back home was way better than here. Here all you do is assignments, and you can do awful school work and stuff like that, it helped me. But back home they really make you work for it, here you can just get grades just because you finish assignment or homework

or you do group projects. But back home 60% is exam, 40% is classroom activities and like your homework and stuff like that.”

Solomon revealed that the competitiveness, along with the test-taking culture of the Ethiopian education system, aided in his preparation for college in the U.S. While Solomon finished his first semester of his senior year in Ethiopia, the migration process forced him to finish his high school education in America. While he did not discuss any academic difficulties transitioning to high school in the U.S., the difficulty of the Ethiopian school system may have allowed him to finish his high school career with minimal effort. This resonated with other immigrant students, who discussed the benefits of the high school rigor in their home country, despite attending non-elite public schools. Yet, this may be explained by the fact that the majority of immigrant students mentioned attending high schools in their lower-income community. Additionally, Solomon’s narrative may also illustrate that his prior academic experience may leave him unprepared to address and understand the discussion and non-examination components of the classroom.

. **Cross Cutting Analysis.** Despite attending different school systems, both the immigrant and international participants revealed that the rigor of the educational system in their home country prepared them for the rigor of the U.S. post-secondary system. Likewise, students across both groups discussed deficiencies in their preparation. While for immigrant students their lower-resourced public schools were not equipped with the practical expertise to help students understand the material, the misalignment between British and American systems was the biggest setback for international students. However, commonalities in the students’ discussions of high school rigor may illustrate that students’ experiences in their home countries instilled

them with a strong-work ethic necessary to mediate potential academic difficulties at the post-secondary level.

While research demonstrates a relationship between culture shock, psychological outcomes, and acculturation (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), the narratives in this section demonstrate an indirect relationship among cultural capital formation, SES, and socio-cultural adjustment. In that, the variation in access to certain types of cultural capital among immigrant and international student groups can be explained by students' socio-economic status. More specifically, higher income international students that were able to gain a sense of cultural capital via familial resources faced a smoother transition into the U.S., and as a result were more prepared for their adjustment process. However, coming from a lower social class, most immigrant students discussed having minimal exposure to the western world before coming to the U.S, and continued to feel culture shock years after their migration. Thus, it was mainly the international students that were able to use both their financial and cultural capital as a foundation for their adjustment process. Berry (1997) described socio-economic status as a mediator between immigration and negative adaptation. While Berry conceptualized SES to include income, occupation status, education level, etc., the narratives may extend this finding by suggesting that the effect of SES on adaptation may be influenced by access to cultural capital.

### **Heritage Culture**

The bi-dimensional model of acculturation postulates that a person's relationship with the host culture is influenced by his/her affiliation with the heritage culture (Berry, 1980). The ability to integrate one's home culture and the new culture is influenced by the "degree of similarity (actual or perceived) between the heritage and receiving cultures" (Shwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p.239). Therefore, less cultural distance between heritage and



host culture may aid in students' socio-cultural adjustment.

### **Western Culture Adoption**

Moves towards western cultural adoption prior to entering the U.S. higher education system may aid in students cultural integration, as less cultural distance would be present between the migrant's heritage and host culture. However, among international students, the majority discussed their exposure to the west did not necessitate cultural adoption, as they described their heritage culture as very "traditional." Yet, being that immigrant students have had increased exposure to the west, and migrated with their families, some students defined their culture as blended.

**International students.** Despite exposure to diverse cultures, and attending international schools, only one student mentioned western cultural adoption in her home country. In her narrative, Nicole revealed that her family had assimilated to the western culture prior to migrating to the U.S.

"...my family is the typical, the, the very westernized blesh, not to cultural, culturally demand family. We didn't really speak um any language other than English at home you know. My parents speak Fante, which is a Ghanaian language, but they never really spoke any language other than English with us. I learned you know Chi, which is a Ghanaian language also in school, and I learned that, I got to practice that with the house help, which lived with us growing up."

Berry (1980) demonstrated that individuals whose cultural and psychological perspectives resembled those of the host culture were more inclined to assimilate to the dominant culture. Despite living in Ghana, Nicole expressed that her family had adopted a western culture early on. Therefore, rather than make an active decision to adopt western culture, Nicole was raised in a

familial environment that had somewhat assimilated. However, Nicole's process of language acquisition may demonstrate a desire to embrace her heritage culture. Nicole's degree of familiarity and adoption of western culture may have eased her cultural adjustment process upon migrating to the U.S. Cultural adjustment has been seen to have a negative association with differences in worldview, societal norms and expectations, and interpersonal relationships (Arthur, 2000). Nicole's upbringing may then prompt cultural adjustment, as early trends towards western cultural adoption may lead to greater similarities between her individual values and those of her host country.

**Immigrant students.** Among immigrant students, 27% (n=4) have been in the U.S. for five or less years, of which all described their heritage culture in terms of their country of origin. However, with increased time in the U.S. students began to discuss their cultural orientation as bi-cultural. For example, Nate, an immigrant who has been in the U.S. for seven years, discussed adopting aspects of American culture.

"I always try to fit in with the system of, however the system, or however the society socially is going around me. But at the same time that does not meet that I forget where I came from, or what my culture taught me to be, that I go with the flow kind of thing quote and quote. About how society in the moment that I'm in, go with that and try not to be uh I don't want to say bold, but try not to be the excluded person."

Nate revealed that since coming to the U.S., he has made it a point to adapt to the environment. More specifically, he described a bi-cultural identity, in that he adopted aspects of his host culture while maintaining his heritage cultural values. In doing so, he avoids being marginalized by the host society. The notion of cultural adoption also resonated with Gwen's narrative.

Having been in the U.S. for 15 years, Gwen discussed her culture from a multi-cultural standpoint.

“I think my culture is diaspora. I think my culture, I’ve kind of made it a big bag of you know I guess candy in that sense...It’s you know, it’s yeah I think my culture is different people that I’ve met in my life...Even though I love my African culture a lot and my black culture a lot, I’m very much intentional about you know adding other people’s culture to my culture.”

Gwen revealed that she made a conscious decision to surround herself with people from diverse cultures. In doing so, she incorporated aspects of these other cultures into her cultural identity. While she vocalized appreciating her African/black cultural identity, she revealed that her adoption of these other cultures did not require her to shed her heritage culture. Thus, prior to beginning her graduate work, Gwen expressed her cultural identity as a fusion of the differing cultures she has come in contact with.

**Comparison.** Within the sample, time spent in the U.S. seemed like the biggest contributor to students’ host culture adoption prior to beginning their current schooling in the U.S. While the majority of international students had a degree of familiarity with western culture, they discussed their culture solely in terms of their heritage one. However, among immigrants, increased presence and schooling in the U.S. was associated with host culture adoption. In that, through their lived experiences in the U.S., immigrant students incorporated the cultural practices and values of those around them. In doing so, they were able to attain a bi-cultural identity, and in Gwen’s case a multi-cultural one.

## **Collectivist Orientation**

While socio-economic disparities are present across immigrant and international students, both groups discussed a similar collectivist orientation as a core facet of their heritage culture. In that, across the majority of immigrant and international students, participants emphasized the communal aspect of their culture, and its difference from the individualistic nature of American society.

**International students.** Heritage cultural values and practices are essential components to consider as domains of acculturation (Schwartz et.al, 2013). In terms of cultural values, students who come from countries that are collectivist in nature have demonstrated trouble adjusting to the individualistic nature of American society (Schwartz et.al, 2013). Despite adopting western culture in Ghana, Nicole discussed the differences she witnessed in the cultural orientation between Ghana and the U.S.

“My culture, okay the biggest thing for me was how Ghanaians hospitable and friendly Ghanaians are, Ghanaians are very friendly, very open, you know very inquisitive about your and how your family is doing, how your grandma is doing. They ask you a slew of questions when you meet them, they’re very open to helping, you know, almost to a fault. Very family oriented, um, my culture, my culture, very. I mean the biggest thing, I have a couple of friends that studied in Ghana and they say the same thing, oh wow Ghanaians are so nice, that’s the one thing that sticks out the people. That’s definitely something new, the fusion of it. I know that’s the difference between now and here. Especially during the winter when people are very, you know a little cold, and you know very, very individualistic um culture here, where as in Ghana it was very family-oriented, and luvy

duvy and all. What else about Ghana, very nice people in general, um, yeah that's the biggest thing for me, the hospitality and the generosity of Ghanaian culture."

Nicole revealed that the Ghanaian culture's focus on collaboration and interconnectedness runs in stark contrast to the American focus on self-interest. While she adopted aspects of western culture in her home country, an individualist orientation was a new element she had to adapt to. Therefore, Nicole's narrative demonstrates aspects of a bi-cultural orientation, in that she was able to adopt elements of western culture without relinquishing the communal nature of her heritage culture. Likewise, Nicole's emphasis on the kindness of Ghanaian people may imply that it is not a common trait found in the U.S. The lack of focus on unity and selflessness in the U.S. may be viewed as a harsh aspect of American culture, thereby creating a reluctance to acculturate into the environment.

**Immigrant students.** Similar to Nicole's narrative, the collectivist theme also resonated among immigrant students. Despite the number of years in the U.S., immigrants discussed maintaining their sense of communalism within their home community. While Lacy has been in the U.S. for seven years, she mentioned having difficulty adapting to the American style of interaction.

"Um, that's very hard, it's, it's a much different in an aspect of meeting people and how we treat other people kind of, and what is here, we kind of have more respect towards elders, and teachers, and people who have shows us the way in life than I have seen people do here. And moreso the family and the neighbors, that is what is the difference, we know who our neighbors are and we interact more with our society, than people here who are mostly secluded to their own kind of, and very rarely meet...."

Lacy was raised in a culture where elders and authority figures were revered, and living was more communal among community members. More specifically, there was a culture of inclusion in Ethiopia that prompted engagement with others. However, she revealed that Americans tend to prioritize individuality, with seclusion being a common practice. Thus, differences in the culture of interaction may inhibit engagement and friendship development among host nationals.

**Comparison.** Kashima and Loh (2006) outlined that increased interactions between international students and members of a host country increase socio-cultural adjustment. However, students revealed that the friendly and interactive nature of their heritage culture was not commonplace in the U.S. Hence, differences in cultural interaction patterns may lead to difficulties in immigrant and international students' socio-cultural adjustment. Students' experiences transcended class differences, as higher income and lower income students discussed having a collectivist orientation.

## **English**

Language is an important aspect of culture, as it serves both a social function and a means of expressing beliefs, values, etc. Therefore, English proficiency and fluency prior to entering the U.S. post-secondary system is a necessary pre-condition for both cultural adaptation and social adjustment. While the majority of immigrant and international students were proficient in English prior to starting college, the degree differed across groups.

**International students.** Even among students who studied English in their home country, international students have demonstrated feelings of severe anxiety adjusting to a country where English was the dominant language (Dillinger, 2014). This resonated with David's narrative, as he discussed his difficulty with English upon starting college.

“I mean I can speak English, but I didn’t like to speak, I like to speak Amharic a lot. I just yeah, it took a while for me to get into like... Well I guess from the culture back home, back in my school, we never, ever, talked to my, I never talked to my friends in English, I never talked to my teachers in English, it’s just, it was a weird thing, just getting yeah. So tough doing that.”

Despite going to an international school where everyone was able to speak English, Amharic, Ethiopia’s national language, was engrained in the school culture. Being that David did not practice speaking English on a regular basis, he may have been insecure about his speaking ability upon migrating to the U.S. Unlike 43% (n=12) of students in the study who came from countries in which English was a national language, David’s only exposure to English may have been in an academic setting. Therefore, without the necessity to speak English consistently, David experienced difficulty with English communication upon migrating. This narrative runs counter to international respondents like Kali, a second-year international student from Ethiopia, who expressed having no difficulty adapting to the English language.

“Language um I didn’t really have a problem because I went to an all English school, and my high school, so pretty much I went from an English system to an English system, it wasn’t like a total shock to me. So in terms of language, I was definitely very lucky.”

David and Kali had different experiences with their exposure to English at their high school, despite the fact that both students attended the same school. Kali’s constant use of the English language may have led to a smoother transition upon migrating to an all-English environment. The counter narratives between David and Kali illuminate the variation in language adjustment, even among international students stemming from the same cultural environment. Likewise, the narratives reveal that English language proficiency does not equate to language comfort. A lack

of comfort with the host language may impact both students' socio-cultural and academic adjustment by inhibiting interaction with host nationals and participation in class (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Therefore, second language anxiety may intensify stress for migrant students as it is compounded with changes in cultural climate.

**Immigrant students.** While the majority of the respondents said that they were proficient in English prior to migrating, some of the immigrant students from lower socio-economic backgrounds had limited proficiency upon entering the U.S. However, their ability to access ESL classes at the secondary level helped them in their English language acquisition. For example, Nate, a fifth year immigrant student from Ethiopia, discussed the influence of his ESL course.

“Yeah I took several ESL classes in a way to help me out like, things that are like, starting with little readings understandings of conversations. Believe or not, after graduating high school that’s when I finished reading my first book, which was Stewart Little. I was so determined to get my English language as knowledgeable as I can... yeah the ESL did really help me, because of my wanting to know more English, I start read books that are already been read by first or second grade in western society.”

Prior to migrating to America, Nate attended a public school in Ethiopia with minimal exposure to English. Although his ESL course improved his English proficiency, he was still not prepared for the English courses at the post-secondary level. In fact, he expressed having very elementary English proficiency, which he later revealed led to difficulties in his academic and social adjustment upon entering college.

**Comparison.** While none of the international students vocalized being proficient in English prior to migrating to the U.S., a lack of comfort was seen among those in which English



was not one of their home country's national languages. This also aligned with immigrant students, as students from Ethiopia, a country in which English is not a national language, were the only ones to report taking an ESL course in the U.S. However, SES can explain differences in Ethiopian immigrant and international students English proficiency, as the international students attended elite private schools with greater English preparation. As mentioned in the earlier chapters, a lack of English language proficiency is associated with acculturative stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Thus, students from these countries may be more prone to this form of stress.

**Cross cutting analysis.** The students' discussions of their heritage culture reveal similarities across international and immigrant student groups, while also highlighting differences related to length of time in the U.S. and country of origin. Immigrants who spent more than five years in the U.S. described their heritage culture in terms of a bi-cultural orientation, in that they adopted aspects of the host culture prior to entering their current institution. When cultural adaptation starts early, the process is generally smooth (Berry, 1997). This is often attributed to the fact that early immersion allows individuals to assimilate easier into the host culture, and develop a sense of biculturalism. Ergo, immigrant students' increased length of stay prompted cultural integration. While for the majority of international students, early exposure to western culture did not lead to western cultural adoption, both groups had a shared experience of dissociation with the individualistic culture of the U.S. Close ties with a communal culture resonated with students in a higher and lower social class, as both immigrant and international students expressed a strong orientation towards collectivism. Lastly, the narratives also illustrated variations in students' English proficiency, as participants from countries in which English was not one of the national languages discussed heightened difficulty

with this aspect of culture. Thus, students' heritage culture provided varying degrees of preparation for their cultural integration into the U.S.

### **Discussion**

The examination of students' backgrounds revealed that contextual influences impacted students' decisions to pursue higher education in the U.S, and their preparation for the U.S. post-secondary experience. At its core, the findings revealed that family was the foundation for most students' decisions, and that parental resources were a key source of support. However, the degree of support was associated with socio-economic variations between the immigrant and international students, making it likely that the extent of familial influence is impacted by socio-economic status. More specifically, the majority of international students came from a higher socio-economic status, which afforded them access to heightened academic preparation, western cultural exposure, and interactions with diversity. Thus, the findings illustrate the potential influence of social class on students' decision to study abroad, and their preparation for post-secondary adjustment.

Through this qualitative approach, this study was also able to uncover how students' cultural capital formation served as a source of preparation for their university experience. Students' cultural capital included both participants' embodied African cultural values, and western cultural values facilitated through education and international exposure. Therefore, the study demonstrated how social class and capital formation can help to facilitate penetration into the U.S. post-secondary system, and foster interaction with the university culture. More specifically, the participants' familial and academic resources had an instrumental role in the study-abroad decision, and providing preparation for the academic and cultural aspects of the U.S. post-secondary system.

## **Familial Resources**

While most cultural adaptation research focuses on the influence of background as it relates to the migrants' heritage culture, this study found that socio-economic factors related to family and high school resources might influence the adaptation of migrant students. For the international students, this was primarily due to their increased level of habitus, as the majority of the students were second-generation college students, some of which were second-generation to study-abroad. St. John (2012) describes habitus as "habitual patterns in families transmitted across generations that shape and form action" (p. 8). This aligned with the international students' narratives, as their parents' educational experiences contributed to various patterns (e.g. consistent exposure to internationalism) that familiarized students with the U.S and higher education abroad. Additionally, students from a higher socio-economic status revealed that their parental and high school resources provided them with access to cultural capital, in the form of exposure to western countries, diversity, and the English language. These avenues provided students with preparation for the U.S. college/university environment, through which students may become less vulnerable to culture shock.

Even among immigrant students, familial resources were discussed as a contributor to their preparation for studying in the U.S. None of the immigrant students in the study had exposure to the U.S., or experience traveling abroad, prior to migrating to America. Likewise, immigrant students vocalized having less experience with diverse interactions, and in some cases limited English proficiency. These contextual factors resonated with their later discussions of culture shock, as students like Gwen expressed their current difficulties with cultural adjustment several years post-migration. However, despite not attending elite high schools like their international peers, immigrant students revealed that their U.S. high school experience was

lackluster compared to the rigor of their home country. Yet, this may be attributed to the fact that they attended lower-resourced high schools in the U.S.

This study also demonstrated a relationship between social class and voluntary migration. While involuntary migrants usually encompass refugees in the majority of acculturation and adaptation literature, familial pressures to study in the U.S. may lead international students to study-abroad as involuntary migrants. Push motives for migration (including involuntary or forced migration) are related to the relationship between motives, stress, and adaptation (Berry, 1997). However, the international students in the study who described the decision to study abroad as something obligatory, rather than elective, did not vocalize increased psychological or socio-cultural distress in their adaptation. While Kim (1988) outlined that involuntary immigrants have increased psychological adjustment problems, sentiments of stress, discomfort, or culture shock did not differentiate between those making an active vs. passive decision to study in the U.S. However, international students who discussed being primed to study in the U.S. also vocalized a great deal of academic and cultural preparation prior to their migration, therefore preparation may be a buffer in the association between forced migration and negative adaptation.

### **Prior Schooling**

The findings also illustrate how students' academic background prepared them for their adaptation to U.S. colleges/universities. A majority of the international students in this study attended international schools, which equipped them with exposure to advanced curriculum, the English language, and diversity. As outlined in the previous sections, there is a close association between cultural adaptation and academic adjustment among migrant students, with academic adjustment referring to the extent to which students are able to successfully cope with the

educational demands of the academic environment (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). While academic stress may be intensified for international students, as it is compounded with second language anxiety and changes in cultural climate (Smith & Khawja, 2011), the majority of the international students felt they received adequate preparation for their post-secondary experience. For example, students discussed the ease to which they adapted to the rigor and language of their academic environment. However, of the international students who attended elite schools, a few revealed that the different academic focus of their high schools left them ill-prepared to address topics such as essay writing.

Unlike the international students, immigrant students revealed that the high schools in their home country lacked the academic expertise and resources to prepare them for the U.S. educational system. However, for those who were able to attend high school in the U.S., academic support programs and ESL courses were able to mitigate these difficulties. Despite the variations in the students' academic environment, nearly every student revealed that their academic experiences in their home country instilled them with a strong work ethic. Likewise, the difficulty of their secondary coursework prepared them for the rigor of the post-secondary system. This provides a different lens to cultural adaptation literature, which approaches migrant students' academic adjustment from a deficit perspective, in which academic difficulties or challenges of migrant students are typically addressed. However, the findings reveal that the differences in the students' socio-economic status led to a different levels of academic preparation for studying in the U.S. Therefore, this study allowed for an examination of the nuances behind high school experiences and university adjustment.

## **Heritage Culture**

While the acculturation research and the uni-dimensional and bi-dimensional acculturation models neglect to adequately address prior migration context, the findings in this study demonstrate that African cultural values such as collectivism may create barriers to adapting to the individualistic culture of the U.S. The findings demonstrate that the social dynamics in the participants' home cultures differ from that of the U.S., which may then influence how a sojourner interacts with local residents. While heritage culture has been seen to impact engagement with local communities (Blake, 2000), in neglecting to address the students' origins, the cultural adaptation literature presumes that migrant students come from a uniform heritage environment.

As outlined in the previous sections, studies have demonstrated that migrants experience culture shock as they enter a new environment. While Ward (1999) outlined that less cultural distance between heritage and home country aids in the cultural adjustment of migrants, literature has not addressed how migrants may begin their adjustment prior to migration. The majority of international students had prior experience traveling abroad, through which they gained intercultural competence and comfort with diversity. Likewise, for one international student, the cultural integration process began in her home country, as the student's family began adopting western culture and solely speaking English in the home. While immigrant students lacked the financial means to gain exposure to diverse cultures prior to their migration, increased presence in the U.S. was associated with host culture adoption. More specifically, immigrants who have been in the U.S. for over five years described their culture as a blend between their heritage and host environment.

Even among those with greater exposure to western culture, via international exposure or

time living in the U.S., both immigrant and international students revealed that their collectivist culture differed significantly from the individualistic nature of American culture. This led to unfamiliarity and a sense discomfort with socializing, as some participants expressed that the methods of interaction differed from what they were accustomed to. This finding illuminates the multi-faceted nature of socio-cultural adjustment, as the adoption of certain aspects of westernized culture may make students less vulnerable to culture shock, while unfamiliarity with facets like individualism may prompt poor socio-cultural adjustment.

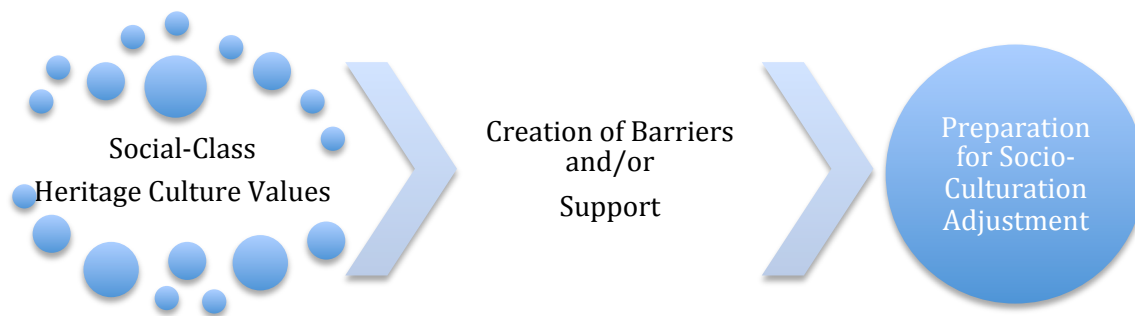
## **Conclusion**

“The traditional theories on college student transition suggest that students’ prior familial, community, and school (i.e., primary and secondary) experiences influence transitions to college” (Paulsen, Smart, 2013, p.113). However, research on the cultural adaptation of immigrant and international students often centers on the possible stresses these students face in their acculturation process, focusing mainly on immigrant and refugee populations (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, this study discussed the contextual factors African immigrant and international students revealed were important to their integration and adjustment process prior to beginning their current schooling in the U.S. The findings in this study illustrate differential levels of academic and cultural preparation between immigrant and international students due primarily to socio-economic status. However, the context behind the process of relocation is an important facet of socio-cultural adjustment not thoroughly examined in the empirical studies.

As illustrated in Figure 5 below, the data expands the influence of students’ background on their university experiences, by illustrating its role in preparing students for their cultural, social, and academic adjustment to American universities. Furthermore, the findings expand the conceptual framework by demonstrating the unique role of socio-economic status and heritage

culture on the association between background context and socio-cultural adjustment. More broadly, the findings extend the current framework and cultural adaptation literature by identifying the complexities of how contextual factors may create barriers and/or support for students' adjustment into U.S. universities.

**Figure 5. Social Class and Heritage Culture: Preparation for Socio-Cultural Adjustment**





## **Chapter 5: Barriers to Adjustment**

In this chapter, I examine the emergent themes as they relate to the relationship between African immigrant and international students' university experiences and their socio-cultural adjustment process. As outlined in chapter 4, students' backgrounds may predispose migrants to culturally adapt and successfully adjust to the U.S. post-secondary environment. However, as illustrated in the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 4), students' college experiences may create barriers to their socio-cultural adjustment.

In examining students' narratives about their college experiences, this chapter identifies facets of the college experience that students revealed created barriers to their cultural, social, and academic adjustment. Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) recognized that in studying social differentiation among students, students' cultures would conceal the potential impact of indigenous differences. Therefore, the focus on the students' interactions with the dominant culture, allows for an understanding of how divergences between students' heritage and host cultures are associated with their adaptation. More specifically, emergent themes from the study signify how *cultural value differences*, *shifts in academic culture*, *experiences with prejudice*, and *difficulties with inter-personal adjustment* helped shape the students' socio-cultural adjustment process. Despite their differing backgrounds, students revealed very similar barriers to their college adjustment in the U.S.

### **Cultural Value Differences**

Berry (1980) outlined that individuals whose cultural perspectives resembled those of the host culture were more inclined to assimilate to the dominant culture, and less likely to reject

adaptation to the local environment. This may be due to an inability to relate to the cultural norms of the society, or feelings of anxiety when attempting to situate one's values into the local context. This study further demonstrates how members of cultural groups make choices on the basis of cultural dissonance from the dominant society (Leong & Ward, 2006), by demonstrating how the emergent aspects of students' African culture (i.e. *religious and collectivist* values) created barriers to their cultural adaptation and socio-cultural adjustment.

## **Religion**

When discussing cultural adjustment, students' religion must be taken into consideration as it relates to their host environment. Reason being, religion has been seen to influence the cultural adaptation of immigrant groups, as "religious practices may pervade both ethnic and cultural practices" (Goforth, Oka, Leong, & Denis, 2014, p.8). Ergo, understanding the role of religion in molding students' values, emotions, and behavior is critical, as it may impact students' success in adapting to the U.S. higher education system.

Within the study, the majority of immigrant and international students discussed being religious, and the intertwined nature of their religious and cultural/ethnic identity. For example, Kali, an international Orthodox Christian student, revealed that:

"Religion plays a big role where I came from, you won't find a lot of people without religion, it kind of shapes how you're raised, what beliefs you have."

Likewise, Gwen, an immigrant Christian student, mentioned the interconnected nature between her culture and religion.

"My culture is hugely my faith."

Religion has been considered an aspect of culture, as it includes "all key aspects of cultures, such as shared values, principles, symbols, and habits" (Gattino, Miglietta, Rizzo, & Testa, 2016, p.

1194). This resonated with most of the participants in the study, despite migration status, who discussed the close association between their heritage culture and their religion. In fact, only four students (2 immigrant and 2 international) did not discuss religion when asked to describe their heritage culture. Therefore, among the majority of students' who mentioned close Christian (71%, n=20) or Muslim (20%, n=4) affiliations, this value system transcends into the cultural domain. However, group differences surfaced in discussions of the cultural conflicts students experienced on campus, as international students decreased exposure to secularism created adjustment difficulties.

**Immigrant students.** Despite discussing religion as a fundamental aspect of their culture, most of the immigrant students did not vocalize experiencing barriers due to their religious values. However, this can be explained by the fact that the majority of immigrant students mentioned being far less religious since leaving their home country. For example, Blake stated,

“I grew up very Islamic...Sunni Islamic, you know kinda traditional, but we came out here and changed a lot, but definitely definitely far more secular now.”

Sentiments of becoming less religious with increased time in the U.S. resonated across immigrant students, as students revealed not being as active in their religion (e.g. going to church) while in the U.S. However, the university environment exacerbated this for one immigrant, as Zaid discussed being led away from her religious upbringing in college.

“...You know I like to say I was religious before I came to college, but once I came to college I found myself moving even further away from my religion, which really took a toll on me you know. No one was Orthodox here really, the church was really far so I was like never going to church, and not really praying like I should, and eventually I just

started feeling guilty and conflicted... the environment kinda pushes students away from religion”

Having been raised in an Orthodox Christian home, Zaid discussed her struggles adapting to a more secular environment. In moving out of state, she no longer had the church community as her basis of religious support. Additionally, she revealed that the focus on secularism at her liberal university created a push to adopt this value system. However, in doing so she was left with an internal conflict.

**International students.** The move towards secularism presented heightened challenges for international students, as they revealed conflicts between their religious values and university culture. For example, Nicole revealed the misalignment between her religious Ghanaian culture and that of her university.

“...it definitely doesn’t align in terms of university, the biggest thing is hook-up culture, it doesn’t align with that at all, fornication, you know you explained all that in Ghana you know so. And, and, as, as Christian, they definitely harped up in church and the bible, that’s the biggest thing. Drinking, and you know losing your guard and all that, that’s the biggest divergence between my culture and university culture....They’re just things that I didn’t grow up doing, and so I didn’t you know. I hadn’t had any interest in breeching my conservative upbringing.”

Beyond the Christian students, Abraham also illuminated that the “partying” aspects of college culture diverged from his Muslim upbringing.

“In my culture I’m Muslim, so I don’t drink alcohol and all that... my friends loved college, loved drinking and that sort of thing, so that was different from me”

Research has demonstrated a negative association between religious group affiliation and host culture adoption, and a positive association between religious affiliation and heritage cultural maintenance (Gattino, Miglietta, Rizzo, & Testa, 2016; Friedman & Saroglou, 2010; Güngör 2007; Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007). This resonated with Nicole and Abraham, who had a strong connection to their faith, as their faith led them to stray away from adopting aspects of the university culture that ran counter to their values. While they did not discuss complete rejection of the host culture, the culture shock associated with the university culture prompted disengagement. For example, Nicole stated:

“...it’s very party and drinking oriented, and so you know. After every weekend, it’s like wow what did you do, I drank here, did this, this person passed out, this person was rushed to the hospital, very messy, very living on the edge and all of that. So, I think I was pressured to do that, so I definitely liked sort of disengaged from that, that demographic....”

While Nicole felt the university culture pressured her to assimilate to the “party” culture, she discussed taking active steps to reject it. In doing so, she dissociated with aspects of the university culture that ran counter to her religious upbringing, and those closely associated to it. This aligns with research, which outlines that “beliefs and practices are negatively associated with mainstream culture adoption, likely because they make salient the cultural differences between the heritage and mainstream cultures” (Gattino et.al, 2016, p.1199). Therefore, the value conflicts between Nicole’s religious culture and the university culture prompted her to reject both the host culture and its members. Although this level of disengagement from the university may have temporarily impacted her social integration, as the differences in value systems inhibited interconnectedness with host nationals, Nicole later revealed that it prompted her to

join philanthropic fraternities among her like-minded peers. Abraham on the other hand did not change his social group due to differing religious values, but rather opted out of drinking. Thus, conflicting religious values led the students towards different paths in their socio-cultural adjustment.

Moments in which the university culture contrasts with the students' religious values may also prompt international students to assimilate. This resonated with Danny, who discussed yielding to pressures to conform to the university culture despite its incompatibility with his values. However, in doing so, he disclosed the distress it later caused him.

“Sometimes when I feel, I don't know I just feel it, and it means you know something is not right and then I just really value it. And it's just like I'm slowly, just doing things that maybe subconsciously I'm not feeling okay with, and that takes a toll on my, well both physically and mentally.

Danny stated that while he was a Christian, he classified himself as moral more so than religious. Yet, during his university experience, he discussed that his “engagement” with the university culture led him to stray away from his morals. This pressure to assimilate led to both physical and psychological distress, which he later revealed took time to get “ahold of.” Unlike the other international students, Danny was one of the few students who did not discuss close ties with his Christian background. Therefore, Danny may have been more susceptible to drifting away from his moral values, thereby leading him to face an internal conflict and psychological distress. His experience resonated with that of the immigrant students, as a weaker religious orientation was associated with the adoption of secular practices.

**Religious integration.** Religion has been described as a “part of a larger cultural whole with respect to which people regulate their degree of belonging” (Saroglou, 2007, p.178). This

resonated across certain immigrant and international students, as they discussed finding a community on their campus through religious organizations and affiliations. For example, Daisy revealed that she found both her Christian faith and a new social group on campus.

“I was able to make friends with my church group, also my faith has been a huge development. Ever since I came to college I became a Christian when I came to college...”

As an international student, Daisy revealed that “blending in socially” was not a priority for her, but rather her focus was on doing well academically. However, in finding her religion on campus, she was able to find a friendship group. Being that this church group is comprised of current and former students, it provided her with a connection to the university in the form of a sense of belonging to a community on campus. Even among immigrants, Blake revealed that the Islamic student community provided him with both a “community” and a place of solace against the racial, cultural, and religious tensions at his predominately white environment. He stated that despite not feeling connected to the broader university community, he does feel connected to those who attend his mosque.

“...the Islamic community. I do pray every now and then, so that’s to be around people that look like you, that speak some sort of Arabic, so there is that solidarity there, so there’s just interactions and they build upon each other...my community at the mosque yes, the sub-communities I feel connected to, the greater university no way in hell.”

Daisy and Blake’s narratives align with Saroglou (2007), who found that “a strong, classic religiousness turned out to be a factor consolidating identification with and belonging to the origin country and culture” (p. 194). For Daisy, her Christian fellowship helped her to adopt both a cultural value system and a religious identity that connected her to a campus community. While

for Blake, the maintenance of his Islamic value system led him towards a group on campus that consolidated his feelings of marginalization from the broader campus community. Therefore, religion may be a source of both cultural adoption and cultural maintenance that serves as an avenue towards social adjustment for some African migrant students.

**Comparison.** Cultural adaptation research and literature has traditionally focused on ethnicity (Niens, Mawhinney, Richardson, & Chiba, 2013), thereby neglecting to explore religious identities and attitudes. However, the findings in this study demonstrate an association between cultural adoption, religion, and socio-cultural adjustment. The majority of immigrant and international students discussed their religion as a core component of their heritage culture. However, increased exposure to the secularism that permeates American culture prompted immigrant students to move away from their religious values. In adopting a more secular value system, immigrant students were then less inclined to experience cultural conflicts due to their faith. These findings resonate with those of chapter 4, as immigrants increased presence in the U.S. was associated with western culture adoption, and integration into the host environment. However, international students demonstrated a stronger sense of religiousness that led to more cultural conflicts on campus. Despite their increased familiarization with western culture through international travel and exposure to diversity, secularism was a barrier to their socio-cultural adjustment. Yet, across both groups, religious communities on campus were discussed as an avenue to integrate their heritage and host cultures, thereby aiding in their socio-cultural adjustment. Thus, the findings in this study reveal the unique barriers associated with secularism, and the impact of religious organizations in facilitating the process of cultural and social adjustment into the host environment.



## Collectivism

The collectivist nature of African cultures (see chapter 4) tended towards decreased self-interest in relation to individualistic cultures. Therefore, upon entering U.S. universities, many of these African students faced problems as they adapted to this value system. Although both immigrant and international students expressed their displeasure with the degree of individualism present in the U.S, international students discussed heightened difficulties adopting this value system.

**International students.** Among international students, those in their earlier years of schooling in the U.S. expressed the most difficulty adapting to the individualistic orientation of their university. For example, Jenny, a second year graduate student, stated:

“R: Uh, I would say my, when I talk about culture, I would say the way of life. So to me my culture I’ve been raised in a community setting, where I can go to my neighbor, or my son go to the neighbor, they play, he can even have lunch there, they’ll call and tell you oh your son is here. But here, the culture is so much individualistic. Like back home, homes are open to, even if someone person say oh hey hello, oh hi come on I was eating and someone passes, and they can pass by and grab something to eat, but here most of their apartments are closed, even you don’t know if there are people there. Even greeting, you, someone greet, people don’t greet a lot, when back home it’s funny to pass by someone and don’t say hello, people would say you are not well brought up, but here people would just pass and someone would not say hello to you. So the culture here, people are so much on their own, they are so individualistic. But I grew up in a village, it’s a community, you feel you are part of the community, you part of the village, but here it’s all about like you and this apartment, or in your room and all that.

I: Do you feel that you've had to alter or change some of your values to adjust with the university culture?

R: Yes of course I had to because you have to go with what people are doing, it may be affecting you, you are not, I would say, I'm not free with whatever is going on, but this is the train, it's how I have to behave."

Accustomed to her collectivist culture, Jenny discussed the adjustment she needed to make in order to adapt to the university culture. She divulged that those in her host environment are closed off to their neighbors, so much so that friendly greetings are not often exchanged. The social customs of her host environment are a dramatic shift from the hospitable and welcoming nature of her heritage culture, as interpersonal interactions are more commonplace. While Jenny revealed that this method of interaction did affect her, she felt that there was nothing she could do to overcome this cultural conflict. Accustomed to a community-oriented social life, she experienced a great deal of confusion and uneasiness upon her migration, as the standoff nature of Jenny's host environment is typically associated with poor manners in her Ugandan culture. Yet, despite her preference for communal living, Jenny felt that she had to assimilate. Furthermore, she discussed a lack of freedom in her decision to adopt the individualistic aspects of her host culture, as host nationals are "trained" to behave in an isolated manner. Thus, a move away from communalism may force international students into social isolation, which may then impact students' adjustment and overall wellbeing.

In a sample of college students from immigrant families, Schwartz et.al (2013) found that students who are able to adhere to both the individualistic value system of their host country and the collectivist value system of their heritage country were associated with greater levels of well being. While the immigrants in this study did not discuss adopting an individualistic orientation,

Daisy revealed blending her heritage culture with the individualistic value system at her university.

“I think I’ve felt the need to stand out you know which is a culture in the U.S. that is very celebrated, being individualistic and being able to stand out in the crowd. I found myself really changing my sense of style, to one really reflect my African heritage, but also to truly stand out and be more daring with what clothes I wear, so that’s been an adjustment, where some parts were from the culture that respond to it yeah.”

Daisy discussed the individualistic culture as encouraging uniqueness, thereby prompting individuals to be distinct. This perspective on individualism does not run counter to communalism, which may explain Daisy’s acceptance of this cultural value system. She revealed taking steps to stand out, while simultaneously incorporating her African culture in her clothing style. Therefore, in combining differing cultural components, she is able to take on a bi-cultural stance. Daisy’s narrative reflects the willingness African international students may have to adopt differing cultural values if they do not run counter to their heritage culture.

**Immigrant students.** Among immigrant students, 86% (n=13) have been in the U.S. for at least four years. Yet, despite the increased number of years in the U.S., some of these students also discussed issues with the individualistic nature of their university culture. More specifically, the collectivist nature of the African culture created a support system for students that immigrant students no longer had at their university. Within the study, Kane discussed transitioning from a culture of communal support to one in which “everyone fend for themselves.”

“It’s a culture, the way the culture grows because you know the community supports the children. A child in Africa is a child of the community; the child only belongs to the mom when the child is in her womb. When the child comes out, the child belongs to the

community; the child can eat in any house, so that is like a community. So that tends to make our parents to think that once you're out there you can survive, which is a different story back here.”

Kane outlines that African parents tend to believe that the communal culture of their homeland would resonate with American culture. This leads to a false belief within families that students would be watched over by their host environment. However, Kane outlines that survival in the U.S. does not depend on community support, but rather falls on the hands of the individual. He later revealed that upon entering the university, he faced a series of difficulties navigating through the university environment without any type of guidance.

In a similar vain, Blake discussed the individualistic nature of his university as a contributing factor to his decision to leave the U.S. upon graduation. He stated:

“it is really competitive, and you have to do this and you have to do that, and be individualistic, like you know we're collective,...I would be lying if didn't say every single day, and it's funny because people think about the united dream, and I'm just like I can't wait to go back, I got my education, I got my experience and I'm going to take it back home”

Although Blake has been in the U.S. for 14 years, he still faced difficulty adapting to his environments' emphasis on individualism. He revealed that as an African he is by default collectivist, which led him to struggle in his very self-serving and competitive academic environment. However, beyond his university, Blake attributes individualism as a core component of American culture. Therefore, his desire to leave the country upon graduation is partially impacted by his complete rejection of this cultural value system.

**Comparison.** Across both immigrant and international students, participants discussed a close association with a collectivist orientation, both in their home country and the U.S. Despite the numbers of years in the U.S., a communal orientation presented students with barriers as they adapted to their host environment. While acculturation encompasses a “loss of behaviors and their replacement by behaviors that allow the individual a better “fit” with the society of settlement,” the findings reveal that collectivism is a cultural value that students are not willing to shed as a means for integration (Berry, 2005, p. 707). This is especially relevant among more recent migrants, as international students in their earlier years in the U.S. expressed heightened adjustment difficulties.

While cultural conflicts with an individualistic orientation also resonated across class differences, lower income international students vocalized more difficulties with individualism. As one of two lower income international students, Jenny discussed heightened psychological distress with this value system. Her background may have exacerbated this difficulty, because unlike the other international students, this was her first time away from her family for an extended amount of time. Therefore, while the opposing cultural orientations created adjustment difficulties, the extent of the conflict may be explained by time in the U.S. and background preparation.

### **Cross cutting analysis**

In summary, students whose cultural perspectives differed from those of the host culture faced a series of barriers in their adaptation to the local environment. Emergent themes addressed differences in religious values and collectivist orientations as factors impacting their socio-cultural adjustment process. This was apparently due to an inability to relate to the cultural

norms of the society, and/or feelings of anxiety when attempting to situate one's values into the local context.

The differing levels of difficulty students had with cultural dissonance may be attributed to students' lived experiences both in the U.S and their home country. For example, having lived in the U.S. for a greater amount of years, the majority of immigrant students discussed a move towards secularism prior to entering college. Therefore, having better integrated into a non-religious environment, they mentioned less religious conflicts on campus. However, as more recent migrants, international students discussed both psychological and physical distress in their encounters with social practices that did not align with their religious values. Ergo, lived experiences in the U.S. provided immigrant students with a level of preparation for secular environment. Similarly, students' lived experiences were also associated with adaptation to an individualistic orientation. More specifically, recent migrants, and those with minimal international exposure, expressed heightened psychological difficulties in their move away from a collectivist culture. Thus, students' degree of exposure to the west, and its culture, helped to mediate religious and collectivist value conflicts.

### **Academic Adjustment Barriers**

Similar to the host nation, academic institutions have a set of cultural practices that encompass methods of dialogue, social behaviors, etc. (Tierney, 1988). Research has asserted, "that a high degree of congruence between student values, goals, and attitudes, and those of the university increases the likelihood that students will persist in their tertiary studies" (Buchanan, Lijungdahl, & Maher, 2015, p. 295). Therefore, analogous to the psychological and socio-cultural implications, cultural differences may impede on academic performance. Within the study, immigrant and international students faced barriers as they sought to understand and

negotiate through these academic practices. More specifically, difficulties with the explicit norms and normative academic values of their institutions hindered students' academic integration. While difficulties with language and structure resonated across both groups, differences arose as a result of students' prior academic preparation. In that, immigrant students felt unprepared to address the academic rigor, while international participants discussed difficulties with American-based content.

### **Immigrant Students**

Unlike most of the international students in the study, the African immigrant students did not attend elite private schools that simulated the college environment. Therefore, some of these students discussed their difficulty adjusting to the rigor and academic culture of the university. Prior to migrating to the U.S., Fabeha vocalized her lack of familiarity with the academic culture of the U.S.

“I realized a lot of the students that I was in classes with in college went to boarding schools on the east coast, and were very much used to like the culture of academia more than I was. So in terms of reading and writing I was prepared, but I don't think I was prepared for the culture of the school.”

Fabeha attended a small private institution, in which the student population tended to come from a higher socio-economic background. Unlike the majority of the students who attended boarding schools, she discussed being unprepared for the living arrangements, rules and regulations, behavior patterns, and the material facilities of her university environment. These sentiments of being unprepared also resonated with Gwen.

“I think in that sense there is no preparation really preparing you for the college rigor, you know you might take courses but it's still not the same, there's still not preparation

on how to prepare you to enter to college. And the rigor you have to do to make sure you're doing well. And also this is silly, but the dorm experience, the roommate thing was terrible. I feel like again with that you're just put with somebody, which is fine, but the cultural experience, the cultural differences, is I mean my first three years of college the roommates were terrible, absolutely terrible so there is no preparation for that. So hey this is the person you'll be living with yeah, you don't have any cultural senses to other people."

Gwen unveiled that her high school experience did not prepare her for the academic climate of her university, as she later discussed the "fast paced" nature of the university environment differed significantly from what she was used to. Despite exceling in honors courses, she revealed that her secondary schooling did not prepare her for the "college culture," which she elaborated to include aspects such as picking a major, seeking out advising, developing scheduled study habits, etc. Additionally, Gwen discussed feeling ill equipped to address cultural conflicts with her peers. Coming from a relatively homogenous background, even after migrating to the U.S, Gwen later mentioned feelings of distress as a result of cultural differences between her and her dorm mate. Therefore, coming from a lower socio-economic background, Fabeha and Gwen expressed feelings of culture shock associated with a lack of preparation for the U.S. academic culture

As outlined in the previous chapters, international students face challenges related to a mismatch between pre-arrival expectations and their actual experiences upon entering their post-secondary environment. One such mismatch involves the incongruity between students' prior academic performance and their performance upon migration (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, within this study, immigrant students were the only students that mentioned difficulty



with the divergence in their academic performance. For example, Amina revealed her difficulty with academic mismatch.

“I think the major difficulty had to do with academics, because in high school I was used to being the top student and it wasn’t difficult to be that, because I naturally took on that role. But when I was surrounded by other kids who were the best where they came from it was difficult to, I guess compete with that, even though I wasn’t competing with that. It felt that I had to keep up and work a little bit harder. I know a lot of um, a lot of the students that were in my classes had the support of their parents, and their guidance and the financial assistance and I didn’t have any of that.”

Similar to the majority of the students in the sample, Amina discussed excelling in high school. However, upon attending a prestigious research university she found herself struggling amidst the competitive academic environment. Coming from a lower socio-economic background, she revealed that she lacked the support afforded to her classmates. Yet, unlike her secondary experience, she was unable to thrive through her own persistence. In a similar vein, Gwen discussed the anxiety associated with maintaining her grade point average.

“...you’ll be fine you have a 4.0, you are a smart student, it just got me really scared about me being okay, because what happens if I don’t get those grades, and that’s what happened. Next semester I did not get those grades, it was terrifying because all this identity had been based on me getting good grades my first semester...”

While Gwen excelled in her first semester, her ability to maintain that performance led to a period of anxiety and distress. She discussed being so “grade centered” that performing less than perfect made her insecure about who she was. Similar to Amina, Gwen expressed not having support to help her overcome the competitive culture of the university. However, expectations

that migrant students handle the same academic demands as domestic students (Valka, 2015), may not be feasible for those who lack support. Thus, the students' inability to meet their academic expectations in a competitive academic culture may create additional barriers to their adjustment.

### **International Students**

Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey (2005) have demonstrated that African international students have felt that the U.S. educational system was centered on White cultural values. These students may then have difficulty relating classroom content to their home country, or lack the background knowledge to contribute to class discussions. This resonated with Jenny, who discussed the difficulty adapting to an academic environment centered on American policies.

“I felt it difficult all the examples using American. I have this class in social policy, but all the policy they teach are like state policy, and then you find trouble understanding the state policy. I wish there were like international policies, which I can kind of relate. So I found the curriculum is so American, but it doesn't cater for international center. In the institution we are there from an international student, but I feel the curriculum doesn't cater for that.”

In a similar vein, Gale discussed lacking the background knowledge of her American peers.

“...these students had studied a certain set of books in the classroom in their high school that I had now idea about so I felt left out sometimes, and I really hated that feeling, it sucked to be in a classroom where you felt you couldn't contribute because either no one could understand what you're saying, or two, you were not well-versed in the conversation that was going on in that class...”

Unlike immigrant students, international students are in a period of transition, as their temporary stay in the U.S. is for educational purposes (Mori, 2000). With intent to return to her home country, Jenny came to the U.S. to further her understanding in her field. However, she had difficulty understanding broader concepts, because the examples used in class were focused on state policies. Without prior knowledge on the background context, Jenny later revealed that it prevented her from understanding how it could be related or used back in her home country. She then expressed a desire for globalized curriculum whereby she could better understand and apply the knowledge in the classroom. Gale also addressed neglect in the classroom, as class discussions failed to cater to non-American students. She revealed that her classmates were all privy to certain material, being that they attended high school in America. Therefore, without a briefing on the content, she was often excluded from class discussions. This hindered her academic adjustment, as she was unable to fully grasp the content and participate in class discussions.

### **Comparison**

The immigrant students' discussions of their difficulties adapting to the academic rigor of their institutions align with the findings in chapter four, which demonstrated lower levels of academic preparation for U.S. institutions among immigrants. Coming from a lower-socio economic status, these students attended under resourced schools that may have been ill equipped to address the demands of the U.S. post-secondary environment. The impact of prior schooling was furthered in the discussions of international students, who neglected to mention poor academic performance or difficulties adjusting to the rigor. In fact, several international students stated that their first years of college were essentially covered in high school. However, international students did face setbacks in relation to U.S. specific content, as a lack of

background knowledge led to periods of confusion and inhibited class participation. Yet, immigrant students' high school experiences in the U.S. may have bridged this gap. Thus, disparities in academic difficulties were associated with students' pre-college academic preparation.

### **Shared Barriers**

While immigrant and international students varied in their level of academic preparation, difficulties associated with language and structure resonated across both groups. More specifically, international and more recent immigrants discussed difficulties with an American dialect and a less hierarchical classroom structure as inhibitors to their academic adjustment.

**Language.** Academic stress may be intensified for international students, as it is compounded with second language anxiety and changes in cultural climate (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). While the majority of students in the sample were fluent in English prior to starting college, some discussed experiencing stress due to difficulties with English in the classroom. Across both immigrant and international students, this was primarily due to the pronunciation of words, including accent, and American dialects. The majority of the respondents were taught the British pronunciation and terminology, which hindered their ability to understand both their American peers and professors. For example, Bill, an immigrant student, discussed his transition from British English in Ethiopia to English in America:

“When it comes to speaking wise I have had difficulties understanding, being able to cope up with the accents is a little bit different, even if you speak English out there there's a different accent. And you don't speak it that often, even if you go out in the community, no body speaks it. ... so that was a problem for me, like to understand the. I

understand the words but sometime the way they say it is different from the way that I had learned...”

In a similar vein, Jenny, an international student, discussed the ramifications of her language difficulties on her classroom performance

“...I go to class sometimes you ask for something, and then for some reason someone doesn't understand what you are talking about. Somehow the language is different, in Uganda we are trained in British English, some terminology is quite different in the American system. So they use some tongues, and some words you can figure out what they mean, but at some point, they will see you in class maybe something you don't understand but you don't want to embarrass yourself, so you pretend everything is fine, but it is not fine...The language problem brings you down, something may just say, because you didn't understand it you can't contribute to that topic, so in that way you may be perceived that you are not active in class, or you don't understand. So sometimes you feel like you are seen as stupid, sometimes when you ask something, someone may laugh, that alone makes you feel did I ask a stupid question, because everyone else is understanding what they are talking about apart from you. So most of the time you feel yourself as down low...”

Difficulties with the English language impacted the students' academic performance, as it prevented both Bill and Jenny from fully understanding lectures and class discussions. In his home country, Bill revealed that he had limited exposure to the English language, which combined with a different accent, left him unable to understand certain terminology.

Additionally, Jenny divulged that the inability of others to understand her dialect prevented her from getting her questions answered in class. Language difficulties created such barriers that she

withdrew from asking questions or contributing to class discussions for fear of embarrassment, as she discussed being the subject of ridicule and ostracized in the classroom. While cultural adaptation literature has discussed language issues as an acculturative stressor (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006), these findings illustrate how variations in English dialects may lead to both poor academic adjustment and psychological implications.

**Structure.** Difficulty adjusting to the organizational structure of the classroom has been seen to cause acculturative stress, as international students accustomed to lecture oriented teaching practices have demonstrated difficulty functioning within discussion-facilitated classrooms (Aubrey, 1991; Liberman, 1994). However, this barrier resonated with both the international students and more recent immigrant students, as they revealed their difficulty adapting to the fluidity and freedom associated with the structure of the classroom. For example, Jay, an immigrant student who was in the U.S. for three years before starting college, discussed her issues with classroom participation, as she was not accustomed to expressing her thoughts aloud in class.

“No, you know how um people are really free like to talk or to ask questions in class, you know really talk louder if you have to say however you feel and stuff like that... even though I’m sociable person and I met people easily and stuff, I still can’t talk louder and ask whatever I want, or say however I feel in class, because of our culture...”

Likewise, Oscar, an international student, discussed the stress he experienced adapting to the informal interactions between students and professors.

“Well yeah it was very, very informal, it still is, and that surprised me a lot. Back home there’s a very, very cordial and respectful student teacher interaction for

example...sometimes when I have questions, when I used to have questions, when I used to have questions for my professors and lecturers for example, I wouldn't know how to approach them, like I said you don't just approach teachers and ask questions and say sir I have this question, so having to properly articulate my thoughts that was an extra stress that I guess probably shouldn't put myself through, but I had to because I wasn't used to the system, and how quote on quote informal it is."

Jay revealed that in her culture, disagreeing with professors and vocalizing one's thoughts out loud disrupts the structure of the classroom and is viewed as disrespectful. Despite attending her last three years of high school in America, she was still accustomed to the rigid structure of her home country. Likewise, Oscar revealed that in Nigeria there is a structured time and method that students ask their professors questions. However, upon migrating to the U.S., he was taken aback by the informal way in which students would approach professors before and after class to pose questions. This led him to experience a great deal of stress, as he was insecure about his ability to address his professor and properly articulate his thoughts. Therefore, within the higher education context, sojourners who have grown accustomed to a classroom culture that is more hierarchical in structure may have difficulty adapting to more informal learning practices. Additionally, these students may be more reluctant to divulge their opinions to professors, who they have been taught to view as authority figures.

### **Cross Cutting Analysis**

Students' academic adjustment barriers can be tied to their prior academic experiences and heritage cultural values. In that, immigrant students' prior experiences in lower resourced high schools left them unprepared for the rigor of the post-secondary system. Yet, their high school experiences in the U.S. helped them to avoid the difficulties international students faced

due to a lack of knowledge on American content. Thus, differences in academic adjustment barriers align with divergences in students' secondary experiences.

African culture has been described as hierarchical (Munene, Schwartz, & Smith, 2000), with people being respected and valued because of their age, experience, and status. This resonated with students' prior experiences with the culture of academia; which, in line with research, explicates professors as leaders of the classroom who share their insights with their students (Parkay, Stanford, & Gougeon, 2010). Both international, and more recent immigrant students, discussed feelings of culture shock upon entering an academic sphere with less of a power distance (degree to which unequal distribution of power is accepted and expected) between the instructor and the students. While this resonated across international and immigrant students, immigrants who have been in the U.S. for more than 7 years did not discuss difficulty with classroom power dynamics. However, this may be explained by the increased exposure these students had to more informal classroom practices in the academic realm. Therefore, cultural value differences may lead to difficulties adjusting to practices that run counter to the hierarchical structure.

### **Shared Barriers with Prejudice**

Research has demonstrated the overlap conceptually between social adjustment and cultural adaptation (Treas & Mazumadar, 2002). Furthermore, Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated that "social and cultural differences are inseparable and that, through time, the social which is synonymous with natural or indigenous culture, is modified by degrees of initiation into artificial, acquired culture"(Robbins, 2005, p.23). Therefore, the belief by non-dominant groups "of the right of all groups to live as culturally different people who interact within the same society" is a necessary condition for adjustment to occur, as it influences how migrants decide to



acculturate and approach the host communities (Phinney, Berry, Vedder, Liebkind, 2003, p. 74). However, within the study, students revealed how experiences with prejudice and stigmatization created barriers to their social adjustment. While difficulty with perceived prejudice was comparable across immigrant and international students, these challenges were heightened among students who attended large predominately white universities (79%, n=22), in comparison to those attending minority-serving institutions (21%, n=6).

### **Racial Stereotypes**

As mentioned in the prior sections, perceived discrimination has been negatively associated with cultural adaptation (e.g. Chen, 1999). Research has outlined that for ethnically visible sojourners, their ability to integrate into the host culture is dependent upon their culture of origin and the level of acceptance they feel from the host culture (Colic-Peisker, 2004). Therefore, migrants' ability to integrate, both culturally and socially, may be dependent upon whether they are ethnically visible. This resonated with several students attending predominately white institutions, as they discussed experiences with discrimination in their academic setting due to their race. For example, Nate, an immigrant student, stated:

“It’s very complicated to say they didn’t view me in a negative way, because I lived in a negative connotation all my life that I had in college. Because there was some issues regards to my color, being black, or me being immigrant, since I’m an athlete, there was so many, so many views negative me towards me, because most of the people see me as I am in there, because, is it because of my minorityness, or is it because of my race, or is it because I’m an athlete, and they don’t see that I am there, because I had good grade in high school, they don’t see that I’m there because of my hard work and all of those

things. And keeping in mind of those things everyday, and themselves, you know motivates you to work hard and to be, to be at the next level.”

In a similar vein, Nicole, an international student, revealed:

“Until I start talking, you know, it’s clear on people’s faces that they don’t expect much from me, you know you dress well, you do your best, whatever. You present yourself well, but people have their own internal biases, but once you speak, if you happen to say some sense, you notice that their body language changes. I’ve always put my content before my appearance, I’ve seen the need to make sure that I’m not just a body in the room, that I have a presence there, my words are heard and all that.”

Nate revealed that throughout his entire college experience, he has battled stigma due to his race, immigration status, and status as an athlete. He divulges that these traits led those around him to delegitimize his place at the university, thereby discrediting his intellectual ability and prior academic achievements. Those who stigmatized Nate, as well as the preconceived notions on his ability, were consistently weighing on him. Yet, rather than create overbearing stress, these events prompted Nate to overcome the stereotypes placed on him. Similarly, Nicole mentioned the perceived discrimination she sensed by host nationals, as she felt others underestimated her because of her race. In order to combat these biases, she took deliberate steps to demonstrate her intellect through active class participation.

**Comparison.** These findings resonated with Lewthwaite (1996), who found that students’ often feel devalued by host nationals. Among both immigrant and international students, participants’ race led to negative stereotyping by host nationals. However, differences surfaced across institutional type. More specifically, students who attended minority-serving intuitions did not discuss experiences with racial stereotyping. The findings also illustrate the

potential need of African migrant students to excel in order combat stereotypes. In that, student's heightened presence as minorities within a predominately white institution propelled their desire to succeed. This may also demonstrate that resiliency is an aspect of African culture that serves as a strength against environmental stressors. While stereotype threat has been associated with poor academic performance (Solórzano, Allen, Carroll, 2002), the findings demonstrate a different lens to the association between negative stereotyping and academic adjustment.

### **Accent**

Decipherable foreign accents not only identify students as migrants, but may also “invite discrimination and scorn from native-born individuals” (Shwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p.8). This resonated with some of the participants in the study, who had problems with their accents, despite their English fluency. More specifically, respondents revealed that their accent made them hyper aware of their presence as a foreigner, and intensified feelings that they were being negatively judged by peers. For example, Danny, an international student, discussed the stigma associated with an accent.

“Some people, a lot of people look down on you, that's just fact. I mean when you're walking and have an accent, and when you hear that you're from Africa, you can just tell the whole, the whole conversation just switches you know, that's a give.”

Danny believed that host nationals held negative perceptions about accents, which was exacerbated once individuals discovered that he was from Africa. He felt that students and faculty viewed both an accent and an African background as inferior, which then impacted his exchanges with host nationals. It is clear that Danny felt these negative perceptions were engrained in the host culture, as he discussed these perceptions as “given.”

The anxiety associated with an accent also resurfaced in the classroom setting, as students' accents led to feelings of anxiety when contributing to class discourse. For example, Gwen, an immigrant student, stated:

“Even my research projects when I did them I was paranoid about giving presentation because of my accent, I didn't quite sound the way they wanted me to sound.”

In a similar vein, Daisy, an international student, mentioned how her accent acted as a barrier to her class participation.

“Also the discomfort of having an accent, so being like, if I speak in class the chances that the professors are going to be like come again, it's really high, when it happens every time it gets frustrating after a while. And I found myself like you know just retreating in a corner and listening to lectures, and after a while I was like this is not right, it's a privilege for me to be here. So if that means I'm asked where I'm from a thousand and one times in a classroom that's okay, it's worth the pain so yeah.”

Gwen and Daisy's narratives demonstrate how insecurities about one's accent may impact classroom performance. While Gwen's accent created anxiety around mandatory participation, Daisy's narrative reveals that it may also create apprehension towards voluntary participation. Therefore, for some time she refrained from active class participation. Although Daisy eventually decided to participate in class, she still vocalized the “pain” associated with her identifiable accent. With concerns about clear communication associated with academic challenges among migrant students (Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005), this finding reveals the potential role of accents on this association.

Beyond feelings of insecurity, one student also discussed experiencing discrimination from professors due to his speech. Solomon, an immigrant student, disclosed his professor's preconceived notions on his accent and nationality.

“So I have accent, I'm proud of it you know, so, so I took English, so they make me took like placement test, and then they put me in English 101. So which is like college level writing, so I was in the only foreigner taking the class in my classroom, and then I had a white teacher, so he used to make fun of my English... He thinks just because I'm from Ethiopia, I don't write good essays, that's what he said in the beginning. Like are you good in writing essays, because there a lot of Ethiopians that go to (institution) and they had a lot of bad experiences with that”

The professors' recognition of Solomon's accent, along with his experiences with other Ethiopian students, led him to form certain preconceived notions about Solomon's academic ability. The professor made it clear that he viewed Ethiopian students as a homogenous group, for which he had very low expectations. In fact, Solomon revealed that the professor even went as far as to ridicule him, which may have further highlighted his status as the only foreigner in the class. While Solomon vocalized being proud of his accent, it was something that left him vulnerable to prejudgment by his professor.

**Comparison.** Across student groups, accents contributed to negative stereotypes of poor academic performance among foreigners. Likewise, concern over accents made students apprehensive to participate in class for fear of judgment or ridicule. Despite the number of years in the U.S., students remained conscious of their accents. These experiences also transcended across institutional type, as a decipherable accent was associated with academic adjustment

barriers within predominately white and minority-serving institutions. Thus, students with recognizable accents were more vulnerable to academic barriers.

### **Cultural Discrimination**

Cultural discrimination, which refers to exclusion or hate directed towards a group based on perceived differences in culture, is one dimension that has been understood to cause both internal and external conflicts between majority and minority groups (Ford, 2009). Many of the participants in the study divulged their experiences with cultural prejudice, as they felt members of the university stigmatized their African culture. For example, Danny discussed the cultural mocking that was commonplace at his university.

“I don’t know if it’s a feeling of being inferior or, or somebody else superior to you, trying to impose power, or if it was just a petty... I think it’s actually something pretty sad and pretty ingrained in their way of thinking because it was, it was actually an ignorant mocking of somebody’s culture, because they’re doing something differently than you. You know like for example, they could make fun of you, uh, because, because you have like clicks or sounds in your native tongue, like something like that would be you know it’s, it’s like, actually it doesn’t really make much sense to me. It’s showing your language is inferior to mine because it’s funny, because you have clicks in your tongue so. When you do the math it doesn’t really make sense, but yeah, that’d be an example of what would happen.”

Danny revealed that there was a sentiment of inferiority associated with African cultures, as his language patterns were a subject of ridicule. While he did not understand the justification for such derision, he discussed that this type of mentality was “ingrained” among members of the host culture. Furthermore, he felt that in mocking his culture, the host nationals were imposing

their “power” as the dominant group. Therefore, a lack of openness to diversity on Danny’s campus subjected him to scorn, and further situated him as an outsider in his university community.

Similar to racial stereotypes, the perceived primitive nature of Africans was a common stressor expressed among some of the students. Liebkind (2008) outlines that perceived discrimination and negative stereotyping by the dominating group prevent migrants from adjusting to the dominant culture. This resonated with students in the sample who mentioned discomfort in their university environment due to prejudicial beliefs about their African culture. For example, Nicole revealed that in addition to racial stereotypes, she battled with negative perceptions around her culture and nationality in her predominately white institution.

...they see it as being uneducated, they see it as unintelligent and stuff like that, and that is not correct. We are pretty smart people, they think, the way they perceive Africa is commonly wrong, and I don’t think they want to change their perception of what Africa is you know what I mean. So that, that kinda what I dealt with.”

Despite attending a minority serving institution, Bill also discussed the stress and discomfort he felt due to perceptions of Africa on his campus.

“...I don’t agree, cause when we they explain about Africa it’s an Africa I have never been...Like I know there is poverty, I know there are some problems out there but I always have an issue with how they portray Ethiopia, Africa, in general so. With that being said how they portray the country means how they portray their experience. Some people they don’t even think you have had basic things, that is kinda shocking sometimes to hear from Ethiopia, that’s always the kind of the things and raise my voice and say no that’s not who we are so yeah...”

Misconceptions of students' heritage country may deter sojourners from adjusting the dominant culture, and may also force students to counter these fallacies in an attempt to combat negative sentiments from mainstream society. Bill revealed that within his university environment, he constantly dealt with people who shared their negative depictions of Africa and African culture. In fact, both Nicole and Bill revealed that Africa and its people are typically thought of as underdeveloped and primitive. While Nicole dealt with her discomfort in silence, Bill felt the need to battle these stereotypes, as he felt overwhelming stress with the misrepresentation of his nation, culture, and experience. However, the pressure to adequately portray his heritage culture was an additional burden to his adjustment process. Thus, discriminatory remarks about students' heritage country and culture may lead to psychological implications.

### **Cross Cutting Analysis**

Discrimination as a construct can be difficult to pinpoint, and experiences of bias or exclusion can include a multitude of dimensions (Chan, Tran, & Nguyen, 2012). However, among the participants, immigrant and international students expressed similar experiences with prejudice. More specifically, students' race, culture, and accent made them vulnerable to negative stereotypes and ridicule by host nationals. However, differences did surface in relation to institutional type, as racial discrimination was only discussed among those attending predominately white institutions. The findings align with Berry (1980), who demonstrated that migrants in multicultural societies experience better adaptation and less stress, as students in minority-serving institutions did not discuss issues of racial prejudice.

Research has demonstrated that migrant students face discrimination on U.S. campuses due to stereotypes (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), with discrimination associated with barriers to cultural adjustment and increased levels of depression (Ruble & Zhang, 2013).



However, cultural adaptation research and literature has not really addressed the influence of stereotyping on specific migrant groups (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). Therefore, this study contributes to literature by revealing the shared experiences of prejudice among African immigrant and international students.

### **Interpersonal Adjustment Barriers of International Students**

Inability to adopt a new system of social norms, while also negotiating between their host and heritage cultural expectations, may lead to poor socio-cultural adjustment (Berry, 1997). Interpersonal adjustment is one facet of socio-cultural adjustment, referring to sojourners' ability to socialize and interact with those of the dominant society comfortably (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). While difficulties with prejudice were shared barriers to students' integration, international students discussed heightened barriers in their interpersonal adjustment. More specifically, international students specified the impact of *isolation, new racial conceptualizations, and ethnic tensions* on their university adjustment. This resonated across international students from differing social classes and country of origin, thereby indicating that difficulties with these barriers are associated with less lived experience in the U.S.

#### **Isolation**

Upon migrating to the U.S., students must establish a new social network as a result of leaving their friends and family back home (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, international students in this study discussed their inability to develop social networks, and the negative impact it has had on them. While 60% (n=9) of immigrant students attended college out of state, none of these students' mentioned feelings of isolation. However, having prior experience in American schools, they may be more familiar with developing connections with domestic

students. Therefore, difficulties with isolation resonated only among international students. For example, Jenny revealed the isolation she felt upon moving to the U.S.

“Then personal life is putting pressure on you, most of the time you are lonely, you are depressed, then no one to talk with like. You can’t share all this, at some point I felt there is no one to share with and they can totally understand what I’m going through, so the best thing is to keep quiet and live with it.”

In a similar vein, Daisy discussed her experience with loneliness on campus.

“When I first got into college. I think I was in a very different position from the rest of my peers I remember really spending my freshman fall semester by myself, eating alone, and just really getting to feel the place by myself”

Void of strong friendship networks, several international participants discussed feeling emotionally deprived in their host country. Daisy and Jenny reported having trouble making friends with host nationals, which they revealed added to the stress of adjusting to their university environment. Both students discussed coming from very community oriented backgrounds, but felt like an “outsider” in their university community. Therefore, they did not have anyone to turn to during periods of stress or uncertainty. Furthermore, Jenny shared her belief that the university “favors domestic students,” as events on campus were centered on American culture. However, her inability to relate or understand the local culture further inhibited her from connecting with local students. Being that a domestically based social support system has been associated with the successful adaptation of international students to their host culture (Williams & Johnson, 2011), the students’ inability to form these friendships hindered their adjustment to the university culture.

## **Conceptualization of Race**

Identification as a member of the dominant culture is often seen as a necessary condition for successful cultural adaptation, as the ability to interact with differing cultural groups and obtain knowledge of the host culture heightens migrants' ability to identify with the dominant group and prompts socio-cultural adjustment (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Sherry, Tomas, & Chui, 2010; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). As mentioned in the earlier sections, African migrant students typically come from homogenous populations in which they are members of the dominant group (Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996). However, upon coming to the U.S. African international students are situated as minorities. For example, Oscar vocalizes the discomfort of his newfound minority status at his predominately white institution.

“...when I first came here...this feeling of being a minority was uncomfortable” Oscar revealed that in addition to the difficulty of adjusting to a new cultural environment, negotiating his place as a minority was “tough deal with.” Coming from a relatively wealthy family, Oscar discussed that he was apart of a higher social class in his home country. However, upon moving to the U.S. the stigmatization associated with his race put him in an uncomfortable position as a minority. His experience aligns with previous research, which outlines that international students do not anticipate taking on a lower social status upon their arrival to the U.S. (Ayman & Berry, 1996). Therefore, Oscar faced an internal conflict as he came to understand his place at the university.

Beyond minority status, migration to the U.S. may also lead students to struggle in their conceptualization of their identity. For example, Jenny expressed her difficulty understanding

her place as a black person in the U.S., and how that came into play in her university environment.

“I would say, like in the first semester I came in, uh, first of all I must say I never, I never paid attention to my like race or color. Because back home we are all like race is not in our vocabulary, we don’t talk about race. We are all black people, it’s something we know, it’s not something we talk about. I was telling my friends, the first time I knew I was black was when I came here, here they talk about all those things like black people, they talk much about race. Even in one of my classes it took me a hard time to understand race, like they, they discuss about race, but I couldn’t contain, it’s not in my vocabulary, and then some other time, I would feel this micro-aggressions, but at some point you are not even aware of those...even knowing, and people identifying me as a black person, I wasn’t aware of, so now I’m taking another step to understand all these issues about racism...

Prior to coming to the U.S., Jenny revealed that she never conceptualized her identity in terms of race, nor did she think about her identity as a black woman. However, upon migrating to the U.S., she felt overwhelmed with issues surrounding race and her racial identity. This was especially the case within the classroom, as she had difficulty comprehending racial dialogues in her social work classes. Confusion surrounding race was compounded by experiences with micro-aggressions, as instances of discrimination was something she was not prepared to deal with. While Jenny discussed taking steps to understand race and racism in the U.S., she continued to have difficulty understanding her place as a black student on campus. Therefore, difficulties associated with migration into a new cultural environment may be exacerbated when students are forced to negotiate new conceptualization of self. The presence of this barrier solely

among international students may then indicate that immigrant students have had more time to deal with these difficulties prior to entering their university environment.

### **Ethnic Tensions**

While acculturation literature outlines the impact of perceived discrimination on migrant students' cultural and social adjustment (Boafo-Arthur, 2014), it does not address the potential conflicts within groups of the same race. Although black migrants share racial characteristics with native-born blacks, these students have revealed that their unique culture, language, and ethnicity typically go unrecognized (Kim, 2014). In addition to discussing their difficulties with their racial conceptualizations, international students also discussed difficulties with native-born black students. Nicole revealed that cultural differences led to friction between herself and the Black American students on her campus.

“You know there’s the African society of (university name), and there’s black student association, and NAACP, and all of that. There’s always friction, between at least personal friction between myself and African Americans in general because, I don’t know, I really just couldn’t get along with them...we couldn’t connect in any way. And I think it’s, it’s just a cultural thing... the one thing that stuck out to me when I came to school here was the fact that I was the only black person at the international orientation.

Then the black people finally come, and I don’t feel like I can get along with them...”

In addition to the segregated nature of her university, Nicole’s inability to relate to the black students on her campus further inhibited her from developing a peer group. While she hoped to find solace in the black community, cultural differences within her racial group furthered her isolation. Therefore, the discomfort she felt as the only black student in her orientation was reverberated once she came in contact with students of her same race.

Beyond cultural differences, issues surrounding racial justice were also a point of contention between native and foreign-born black students. Unprepared for the hostile racial climate between blacks and whites, students discussed facing backlash for not taking an active stance against injustice. For example, Gale revealed facing criticism for neglecting to speak up against the negative racial climate at her university.

“I felt that when these things happened at the college level, it was expected that you would speak up. But because I didn’t have that much knowledge at that point to speak up that much, I did get some kind of aggression from it. Some people would be like oh why didn’t you speak up about this and that, and I was like I don’t know much about it...”

Coming from a racially homogenous country, Gale discussed being unaware of the racial dynamics in America. Consequently, her decision not to vocalize her thoughts on racial issues was based on a lack of knowledge. Yet, the black students viewed her silence as apathy, thereby prompting them to react negatively. This enabled her from building strong connections with the black community on her campus, further inhibiting her social engagement.

### **Cross Sectional Analysis**

Research demonstrates that increased interactions between international students and members of a host country increase cultural adaptation and socio-cultural adjustment (Li & Gasser, 2005; Ying & Liese, 1994). However, international students discussed difficulties developing these interactions with host nationals; as an inability to relate to host nationals on a cultural level pushed students further into isolation, thereby heightening their psychological distress. This was furthered by the ethnic tensions international students faced with native-born blacks. More specifically, cultural disconnects and a lack of racial consciousness inhibited African international students from connecting with Black American students. While

international students' backgrounds exposed them to various aspects of western culture prior to their migration, their inability to develop friendships with host nationals may illustrate their lack of preparation for the social component of their adjustment. This is furthered by the lack of immigrant narratives that address ethnic tensions and isolation, as immigrant students' increased lived experiences in the U.S. may have heightened their awareness of their place in society, and taught them how to navigate their interactions with domestic students.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study make an important contribution to the discussion and understanding of the university experiences that impact African migrant students' socio-cultural adjustment to their university environment. Among international students, studies have demonstrated that there is often a discrepancy between one's desire to integrate into the host society and their actual ability to do so (Neri & Ville, 2008; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007). This resonated across both immigrant and international student groups, as cultural, academic, and social barriers inhibited students' cultural and social integration. However, differences in students' discussions of barriers were related to contextual factors, such as immigrants' increased exposure to the U.S., and international students' increased cultural and academic preparation prior to entering their institution.

### **Cultural Distance**

Studies have outlined that international students experience feelings of culture shock as they adjust to foreign environments (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell & Utsey, 2005; Pantelidou & Craig, 2006). This resonated with both immigrant and international students, as a strong sense of religiousness, and a collectivist orientation, was associated with greater adjustment difficulties. However, differences in students' cultural adjustment were associated

with the extent of their lived experiences in the U.S. More specifically, with increased time in the U.S., immigrants discussed a move towards secularism that prevented religious conflicts on campus. However, students' shared difficulties with an individualistic orientation illustrate how exposure to western culture does not necessitate cultural shedding across all heritage values.

The study delineates cultural values that students expressed represented a significant factor in their adjustment process. Some of these values (e.g. religion) are not addressed in acculturation literature. Thus, this study's expanded explanation of culture specifies facets of the migrants' cultural values that impacted their adaptation.

### **Academic Barriers**

The findings illustrate the association between prior schooling and barriers to African migrant students' academic adjustment. Differences in students' difficulties with rigor can be attributed to academic preparation, as lower income students were the only group to discuss problems with rigor. Therefore, immigrant students' lower-resourced high schools may not have prepared them for the academic component of their university. The potential impact of high school experiences was furthered in the international students' narratives, as these students discussed difficulties with a lack of knowledge on American-based content. Lacking the U.S. educational experiences of immigrant students, international students felt unprepared for discussions on American based policies and/or novels. Therefore, prior schooling helped to either mediate and/or exacerbate difficulty adjusting into the academic culture of the university.

Across student groups, participants expressed difficulties in their academic adjustment due to differences in the structure and process of the classroom. Despite students' prior academic experiences, participants had a shared difficulty with more informal learning practices (such as participating in open discussion). While students' difficulties with discussion-facilitated courses



aligned with research (Lieberman, 1994), the implications of differing hierarchical structures and faculty-student interactions extends the research in this field.

### **So-cultural Barriers**

A perception of a positive cultural climate, in which the dominant culture is welcoming of diversity, is beneficial for the minority's cultural adjustment (Berry, 2005). This aligned with the findings, as some immigrant and international participants discussed the impact of racial tensions on their ability to adjust to the university environment. Students who attended predominately white institutions discussed heightened social adjustment barriers associated with the segregated nature of their campus. Across immigrant and international groups, participants revealed that racial barriers to cross-cultural communication were intensified by cultural discrimination. Even among students who attended minority-serving institutions, participants revealed that their status as African migrants situated them as outsiders in their university. Therefore, students' racial and cultural identity led to marginalization by the dominant society. While acculturation literature discusses the impact of discrimination on adaptation, the focus on race neglects to account for both ethnicity and culture.

Kagen and Cohen (1990) and Ryder, Alden, and Paulhus (2000) demonstrated that lower levels of cultural adaptation were associated with a lack of American friendships. Likewise, migrant students who lack a peer support group have been associated with increased feelings of isolation, stress, and loneliness (Kashima & Loh, 2006, Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Ryder et.al, 2000; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Sherry, Tomas, & Chui, 2010; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Similarly, the findings in the study demonstrate the negative impact of isolation and a lack of supportive friendship networks on international students' socio-cultural adjustment and ability to integrate into the university culture. However, the study also illuminates the impact

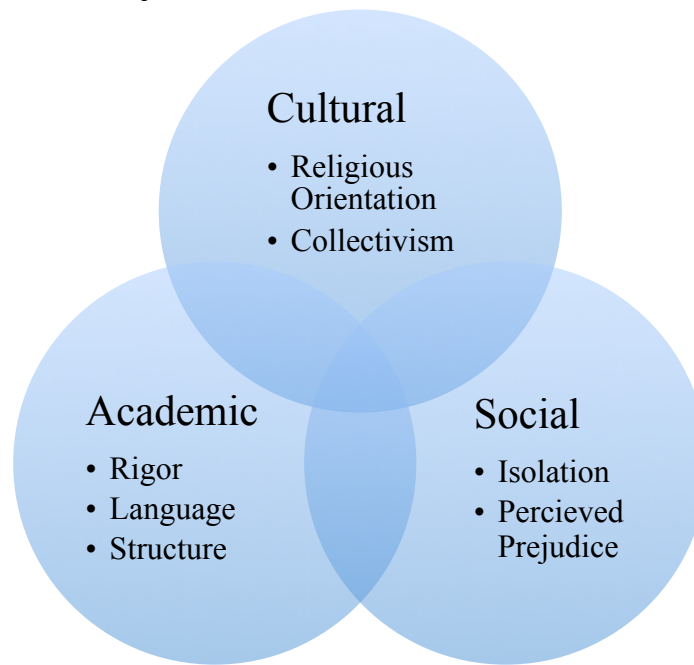
of international students' new conceptualizations of identity on this association. More specifically, international students discussed their struggles conceptualizing their identity as black students, and the role that had on their disconnect with native-born blacks and other host nationals. Ergo, inter and intra-racial cultural divides further marginalized these students. This extends current research to address how tensions between foreign born and native-born blacks exacerbate the psychological impact of racial tensions on campus.

## **Conclusion**

Research has identified perceived cultural distance (perceived social and environmental similarities or differences between host and heritage cultures) and discrimination as factors contributing to low levels of acculturation (Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980). However, this study extends the current literature by demonstrating the impact of these barriers beyond cultural adaptation, to include their association with academic and social adjustment to U.S. universities, and the psychological and physical implications of these barriers. As illustrated in Figure 6 below, the data highlights the main barriers students experienced in their adjustment to U.S. universities, and the overlapping effect of these barriers on their cultural, social, and academic adjustment.

The findings in this chapter provide support for the conceptual framework (Figure 4) by recognizing the role of university experiences on students' academic and socio-cultural adjustment. However, the findings also extend the framework by demonstrating how structural barriers, such as the racial composition of the institution, can have a direct influence on students' adjustment. Likewise, the study illustrates how students' backgrounds are associated with their university experiences. Therefore, students' backgrounds have both a direct and indirect influence on their adjustment to U.S. universities.

**Figure 6. Primary Barriers to Adjustment**



## **Chapter 6: Overcoming Barriers: The Role of Capital on College Adjustment**

This chapter examines the primary sources of support that African immigrant and international students revealed helped them to overcome barriers to their socio-cultural adjustment. The emergent themes led to an examination of students' access to social, cultural, and academic capital on their universities, and its relationship to their college adjustment process. Therefore, the findings in this study illustrate the primary sources of students' capital, and the important role capital has on students' overall adjustment. The focus on these forms of capital allows for an understanding of the power and influence of support systems, information, peer networks, and relationships in helping migrant students adjust and navigate their academic pathway in the U.S. (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011).

First, this chapter examines the sources of students' social capital, and its role in helping the African migrant students overcome barriers to their adjustment. Next, I discuss the major university resources students utilized to help them develop capital and navigate their academic pathway. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how participants overcame the barriers they faced in their adjustment to the U.S. higher education system, and how these findings further extend our understanding about the adaptation process of African migrant students.

### **The Role and Influence of Social Capital: Networks of Social Support**

A review of students' narratives revealed that racially/ethnically similar networks and student groups were an important source of support and guidance for participants. These groups served as a vital source of social capital for participants, because they helped students in their social, cultural, and academic adjustment. For this dissertation, social networks are defined as

people encompassed within a network of social interactions or relationships. Participants mentioned three types of social networks: *racially/culturally similar peers, minority student organizations, and family*. Additionally, international students discussed the important role university administrators had in helping them to develop these networks. Although each type of social network provided support, students utilized them for different purposes as they navigated through their university experience, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Racially/Culturally Similar Peer Groups**

Research outlines that international students experience heightened alienation from mainstream society as a result of cultural adjustment (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Feelings of alienation may then spark sojourners to adopt separatist strategies in which they reject the host culture all together (Berry, 1980). This resonated with findings in this study, as the inability of both immigrant and international students to develop interpersonal relationships with their American peers led to them to develop ethnic enclaves among culturally similar groups. However, points of similarity differentiated across the student groups, as immigrant students sought out racial or ethnically similar groups, while international students gravitated towards other international students.

**Immigrant students.** Among immigrants, students had varying degrees of difficulty integrating into the social circles of host nationals. While all the immigrant students preferred to interact with those from their same heritage culture, those who have been in the U.S. for less than six years (13%, n=5) discussed these groups as their primary sources of support. For example, Solomon, an immigrant who has been in the U.S. for four years, discussed the role of his Ethiopian peers on his ability to adjust to the university environment.

“...and I think it’s because every class that I took so far, I always have one Ethiopian student with me that I study with, or that I even if miss a class even who can help me out. I really didn’t have to go out of my way to feel comfortable in the classroom or in college because like I don’t have to. I don’t have to pretend to be something that I’m not to get know people or introduce or interact with others, because why would I do that when I have Ethiopian friends, and I can be myself. So just because of that so far to be honest I don’t have no problems”

Solomon experienced alienation due to his place as a “foreigner,” as he expressed that students at his minority serving institution tended to disassociate with foreign-born students. He vocalized feeling pressure to assimilate to American culture, but his unwillingness led him to be ostracized by host nationals. However, he was able to develop a support group with other Ethiopian students, whom he was comfortable to seek guidance from on class matters. This also resonated with Bill, who discussed the increased willingness of co-nationals to provide support in comparison to host nationals:

“...people who are from the same country or from the same place as you they understand the difficulties that you might have, so they’re willing to help you. So whenever I need help I had help”

Bill, who has also been in the U.S. for four years, divulged that similar adjustment difficulties created a sense of comradery among co-nationals. Therefore, he was able to seek help from these students, and consistently turn to them as a foundation for support. For Solomon and Bill, co-national friendships aided in their academic adjustment, as their fellow Ethiopian students helped them to circumvent the cultural and social barriers of the university environment. However, these peer networks may have also strengthened their identification with their heritage culture. Reason

being, constant interaction and within-group help-seeking behavior among Ethiopian students may have encouraged them to develop ethnic enclaves at their university.

Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder (2006) demonstrated that in the face of discrimination, young immigrants tend to reject the dominant culture and are more likely to embrace their own ethnic background. These findings are supported by other work showing that perceived discrimination is associated with a preference for separation and marginalization strategies (Barry & Grilo, 2003; Berry & Sabatier, 2010). This resonated with the immigrant students in the sample, especially among the 53% (n=8) that attended predominately white institutions. For example, Saba discussed socializing primarily with other black students as a source of support against the prejudices at her predominately white institution.

“I think it was just like a natural gravitation toward each other, and you hear things, and you feel like oh like we’re going to vent or they do something, something silly was said that was about race or gender and you realize that you were the only ones that understood that, or knew that was problematic, so you connect all of that, you talk about it you know. I feel like that defines my relationships a lot, we’re in a pretty white environment, and so when we are in that environment, we are gravitate towards each other in order to react to it, to support each other in a way that, yeah to support each other.”

At her predominately white institution, Saba revealed that micro-aggressions were commonplace. These perceptions of prejudice caused feelings of stress and discomfort, which then led her to gravitate towards other black students. Being that Saba has been in America for over a decade, she discussed that her status as an immigrant was not obvious. However, her presence as a minority made her stand out, and situated her as “outsider” in the classroom. Yet, in socializing with students of the same race, she had the ability to voice her frustrations and find

support to overcome these difficulties. Therefore, Saba's narrative reveals the impact of racially similar students on helping immigrants to overcome the psychological and socio-cultural implications of discrimination.

**International Students.** Among international students, participants revealed how friendships with other international students aided in their socio-cultural adjustment. For example, Jenny revealed that she used other international students to both navigate and adjust to her campus environment.

“...when I'm with international students, we see other people as American, so whether they come from, because I have friends from Palestine, from Saudi Arabia, we interact a lot, because we have similar stories. We don't identify with the culture, so that's how we developed the interactions...we, we would go like, we would take a bus and...we can advice one another to read the map. Then we take like, we walk around school, some places near the school, eating places, then we gather then do some dishes, traditional dishes from our places, watch a few movies. Sometimes when we see we are so stressed up, we would gather together and have a meal as international students.”

As outlined in chapter four, Jenny discussed her difficulty adapting to the isolation she experienced while on campus. However, through the support of other international students, she not only learned her way around her environment, but also found a group that she could socialize and share her culture with. This group was especially helpful in times of stress, as these groups provided a sense of relief from the academic and cultural difficulties of her environment. The sentiment of a shared experience also resonated with Abraham, who discussed his relationships with other international students.



“So the first couple of friends I made were all international students like me. So they could relate, so we could relate to each other, so that helped us, in a way like get over the culture shock, or being away from home, because we had other people sharing the same experiences as us living in the same area.”

Abraham and Jenny’s narratives reveal that the common experiences of culture shock and homesickness allowed students to form a bond and build a support system. Therefore, they could rely on one another during periods of distress, while also leaning on each other for guidance on how to approach the cultural and academic facets of the university. While co-national friendships have been seen to provide international students with a feeling of cultural identity, emotional support, and helped to attenuate stress associated with cultural adjustment (Kim, 2000; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011), these findings illustrate the similar impact of international networks on these students. In that, a shared international identity helped students from different nations to relate to one another and provide each other with support.

**Comparison.** Across both international and immigrant students, peer groups provided students with access to support, and helped them to manage the stress related to a new cultural environment. However, differences surfaced in the shared characteristics within these peer groups. More specifically, immigrant students’ primary peer networks were composed of racially/ethnically similar students, while international students discussed leaning on other international students as a source of support. Differences within immigrant students also surfaced, as more recent immigrants tended to socialize primarily with co-nationals, while immigrants with increased lived experiences in the U.S. sought out racially similar groups. This may demonstrate that the extent of lived experiences in the U.S. is associated with the development of intra-racial ties.

As revealed in chapter 5, international students expressed difficulty conceptualizing their identity in terms of race, and discussed a cultural disconnect with native-born blacks. Therefore, the shared international identity, and a similar process of cultural integration, may have been the foundation for students' support network. Conceivably, this was furthered by the fact that all of the international students attended predominately white institutions, thereby inhibiting them from connecting with co-nationals.

### **Minority Student Organizations**

The students' narratives revealed that similar to co-national friendships, minority student organizations gave "students an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the new culture through discussions, social interaction, and intellectual exchange with other students who are experiencing the same emotions" (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011, p.282). This resonated with half of the respondents, as 50% (n=14) of the students discussed their involvement in a minority student organization. While both immigrant (33% n=5) and international (46% n=6) students discussed their involvement in racial/cultural student organizations, international student organizations were an additional source of support for international students.

**Immigrant students.** Research outlines that racial/ethnic student organizations may be an important avenue for social involvement among African American and Asian American students at predominately white institutions (Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008; Allen, 1985). This resonated with this study, as some of the immigrant students attending PWIs discussed their involvement in racially/culturally based students organizations. However, the current findings contribute to the literature by revealing the role of these organizations on immigrant students. For example, Zaid revealed the role of the Habesha student association on her social adjustment.

“You know I was an out of state student and it was such a big culture shock coming to (City), like I’ve here longer than I haven’t but I mostly just hung out with Habeshas back home. So in college it was just tough, I felt like I was in another world, and the people here were legitimately crazy, like all they cared about was partying and I had no one I could relate to. Thinking back it was actually kinda sad, I used to call home like four to five times a day, I’ve never been so lonely. I did join the Habesha Student Association my freshman year though and that helped. They were so nice, and we did like community service stuff together, and they even helped me kinda navigate around (City) and recommended some gen eds for me to take...I felt like I found my mini family there.”

Although Zaid has been in the U.S. for over a decade, she grew up in a relatively homogenous environment with other Ethiopian and Eritrean people. Therefore, upon her move out of state, she discussed experiencing similar culture shock to that of the international students. For example, she revealed that the liberal and party elements of the university environment led to stress, and prompted her to separate from that environment. However, in taking separatist strategies, she moved further into isolation. It was only after the recommendation of another Ethiopian student that she eventually joined a student organization with members of her host culture. This not only provided her with a strong peer network, but also helped her to adjust to the academic and cultural aspects of her environment.

Racial and/or ethnic student organizations have also been seen as a vehicle for students to express their racial or cultural identities (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001; Museus, 2008). This resonated with the findings, as some of the students discussed becoming hyper aware of their race at their predominately white institutions. However, among immigrant participants this level of awareness prompted students to join racially influenced student

organizations. For example, Gwen discussed her need to explore her racial identity upon entering campus.

“I think in my grad school experience I was a little more selective, because I wanted to know more about my blackness. I think now it’s very much so my culture in the black associated, African Association, so I mean and also I assume black stuff on campus, so I’ve spent quite bit of time with that, and that’s been interesting... I think very much so it’s my responsibility to interact with those people, I think that’s the only way we can start healing,”

As discussed in the previous chapter, several students mentioned heightened racial tensions at their predominately white institutions. Gwen revealed that her experience prompted her to join black student organizations as a way to delve into her racial identity. She also discussed the role these organizations had in helping black and African students repair the damage of a hostile racial climate. In that, through dialogue and interactions they could vent their frustrations and get advice on how to overcome racial barriers. Therefore, these organizations provided Gwen with a learning opportunity, as she was able to learn more about her racial identity and the obstacles faced by those in her community. Thus, these organizations helped Gwen come to a better understanding of herself as a black student, and her university community, potentially lessening the psychological implications of racial stressors.

**International students.** Similar to immigrant students, international students also discussed the role of minority student organizations on their academic adjustment. For example, Gale revealed how a black student organization helped her to choose a major and progress in her field. More specifically she stated:

“...I also found a lot of help in organizations I joined my freshman year, like the black

(University business school) organization, that was super useful in helping me pick a major. You know I changed my major several times, but having someone to speak with on how to you know pick a major was super useful, and someone to guide me on how to land an internship my summer of sophomore and junior years that was all super useful.”

While Gale knew she wanted to a major in the business realm, she was unsure of the field she wanted to concentrate in. Therefore, she discussed changing majors multiple times, and the anxiety her lack of focus caused her. However, through a racially based student organization she was able to connect with older and more experienced students. These connections not only helped her to decide on her final major, but also led her to several internship opportunities. She emphasizes the usefulness of this information, as she later revealed that her internship and major courses better prepared her for the work she is currently doing. Thus, similar to the role of academic advisors, this organization gave Gale access to capital that equipped her to navigate her academic pathway.

As discussed in the prior section, international students have used their migration status as a point of commonality to build friendships. This essence of a shared experience also resonated at the organizational level, as 31% percent (n=4) of the international students discussed being involved in international student organizations on their campuses. For example, Abraham revealed that through the International Student Association, he was able to make connections with other international students.

“...also going to the student run like OIS, which is the office of international students and admission, they have an affiliated group of students called the ISA. The international student association, and they had a weekly, a weekly coffee hour sort of thing, where every Friday from 4 to 6 you go to the international center and meet people from other

countries, and there's coffee and tea and all that stuff, that was the informal sort of thing, where you meet people, talk to people, who share the same background as you. Every week I would do that as well, and that helped me meet new people, and meet new friends as well."

The international student association provided Abraham with a platform to connect with peers from analogous backgrounds, as all the students were new to the U.S. Among minorities, ethnic student organizations have been seen to help students with similar cultural backgrounds share and understand one another's experiences (Museus, 2008). This resonated with Abraham's narrative, as the related process of cultural adjustment and transition gave these international students a common ground to share their experiences and formulate friendships. Therefore, as a member of this organization, Abraham was able to form new friendships and expand his social network.

**Comparison.** As outlined in the chapter two, St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2011) refer to academic capital as the set of social processes that help students to obtain the knowledge and support essential to the access and navigation of higher education. This resonated with the findings in the study, as students discussed the role of racially/culturally based student organizations in helping them to navigate the academic sphere of the university. While international students discussed these organizations as a means of academic support, immigrant students discussed them as an avenue towards cultural and social adjustment. However, this may be explained in part by the presence of international student organizations, which international students revealed helped them to develop a social network. Additionally, the lack of familiarity international students had with their racial identity, and the cultural disconnect with native-born

black students, may also be a factor in the students' approach to racially based student organizations.

### **Family in the U.S.**

The presence of family in the U.S. was discussed among international students as a vital resource in their university adaptation. While the majority of immigrant students divulged that they migrated to the U.S with their family, or had family already in the country, they did not address their in-country relatives as a source of support. However, upon examination of their narratives, this can be attributed to the fact that none of the immigrant students had family members who pursued a post-secondary degree in the U.S. Therefore, the immigrant students' families may be limited in their ability to provide support, due to their lack of knowledge on the university culture. However, 23% (n=3) of the international students discussed having family in their institution, and the positive role that had on their adaptation. For example, Simon stated:

“There was a lot of people they knew, kind of like family friends and stuff, so they could take care of me, because they are so far away when I came. So they were actually happy that I went to (University), because I kind of had a little family there.”

In a similar vein, Danny discussed his initial adjustment to his university:

“I think it was really good, because it's like having family away from home. He stayed with me for four year, almost four years, he just graduated and he left. I have my sister here now, my baby sister, studying with me. So it's like yeah I still got family.”

Danny expressed having minimal adjustment difficulties upon starting at his university, as his older brother familiarized him with the campus. In addition to showing the students around campus, Sammy and Danny revealed that their familial networks helped them to get over the homesickness they initially felt. Likewise, being that their family members were further along in

their degrees, they processed increased academic capital, which they were able to dispel on these students. For example, Sammy revealed that his family friend helped him to procure a research internship at his university. Therefore, familial networks were used as a pathway for the students' academic and overall adjustment to the university. While Kagan and Cohen (1990) outlined differential outcomes of cultural adaptation among married and unmarried international students, familial presence in the university environment may be an important facet of international student adaptation not thoroughly examined in the literature.

### **Administrative Liaisons**

Unlike the immigrant students, international students' migration status is easily identified prior to entering the university. These students may then receive special services designed to support their transition into the university. This resonated with the study, as international students were the only participants to discuss the role administrators played in helping them gain access to social capital. More specifically, these administrators were important to participants because they connected them with other culturally similar students and/or organizations that expanded their social networks. For example, Jenny discussed how faculty at her university gathers international students, and creates an environment for exchange among them.

“Oh yes, we have a faculty in charge of like international students, so we would get secessions every month to help us understand the culture, to help us meet, like social events. So we've held like, we would meet like once a month to share our experiences of international students, then that would also help you. It's not all about you, other people are also facing the same problem that you are facing. It helps you to kind of, uh, what do I say adjust more, when you know other people are facing similar problem, or issues like



you are facing, it helps you uh understand it's not you alone going through this kind of life. So from those experiences from other international students, you kind of be positive”

At her university, Jenny revealed that certain faculty schedule continuous social events designed to expand students' social networks, while also providing them with insight on the cultural aspects of the university. Through these meetings, Jenny was able to share her problems with other students, and find commonalities with students who also struggled in their adjustment to the institution. This group served as a source of support, as she was reminded that she was not alone in her experience. As a result, she felt a sense of community, which prompted her to be optimistic about her university experience.

Upon acceptance to the university, one student discussed an administrator's role in helping him to develop a social network prior to his arrival in the U.S. The bonds he was able to form were so deeply rooted that he maintained them throughout his college experience, and he even attributed his adjustment to these relationships. This network also gave him insight on the university, which helped to further prepare him for his college experience. More specifically, Simon discussed the Facebook group the international recruiter at his university created.

“When I first started college the first people to, I was, what really helped me was the, at that time the lady that was the international student recruiter, her name was Brooke, she was a very nice lady. So what she could do every year before the freshman would come from Africa, she would create a Facebook group where all of them would be part of, so in that group she would all the incoming freshman, as well as the students that are already going to (University), the African students. So through that before I even came I already got a chance to kind of ask questions to the ones that are already going to the school, people would post anything on the page, it was like a forum. So we could ask anything,

like what to expect on your first day, stuff like that. And people were really helpful, like the current African students, they were really helpful. And also through that Facebook page I also got to meet other incoming freshman, who had the same fears, and things like me, who were also looking for friends and stuff. So I would say that group kind of integrating me into the society, it was great. The friends that I made in that group... they're definitely my lifelong friends and they helped me get through college.”

While several other international students in the study attended Simon’s university, he was the only student to mention this Facebook page or the international student recruiter. Although the reason is not clear, the impact of this Facebook group in preparing Simon for his university experience is evident. More specifically, Simon revealed that this group provided him with a forum to connect with current African students at his university, answers to his questions, and a glimpse of what to expect upon entering the university. Through this group, Simon was also able to develop a friendship network prior to arriving in the U.S., which he revealed played an important role in his college adjustment. Simon even transitioned from a receiver of information to a contributor, as he discussed using the social media platform to connect with incoming freshman. Therefore, through the development of a Facebook group, the recruiter served as a liaison between future and current students, thereby fostering students’ socio-cultural adjustment.

### **Cross Sectional Analysis**

Across both immigrant and international groups, racially/culturally similar peer groups helped to mitigate the psychological and academic difficulties of cultural and social adjustment. While the majority of international students’ primary peer networks consisted of other international students, only a minority were involved in international student organizations. This discrepancy may illustrate a lack of presence, or student familiarity, of these organizations on

students' prospective campuses. However, international students did have access to unique familial and administrative support, as it provided them with a sense of social capital prior to entering their university. Therefore, similar to the 40% (n=6) of immigrant students who attended school in their hometown, they had a pre-established support network on campus.

Among immigrant participants, racially/ethnically similar groups were discussed as the primary source of students' peer networks, as they helped students relate to one another's experience. Ergo, for immigrants the shared experience of being a minority on campus led them towards these communities of support. This differed from international students, who revealed that a similar process of migration provided them with sentiments of a shared experience. Despite the composition of these networks, students revealed that these groups provided them with an opportunity to share their frustrations, gain support during times of distress, and receive guidance on academic matters.

### **University Resources: A Gateway to Capital**

Most of students in this study (71%, n=20) were the first in their family to pursue degrees in the U.S., and therefore possessed little knowledge of the U.S. university setting. While students' backgrounds gave them varying degrees of post-secondary preparation, participants revealed the importance of university resources on their adaptation. More specifically, university resources enhanced students' access to academic, social, and cultural capital, thereby supporting them in their university adjustment. Students discussed university resources three segments: *extensive orientation programs*, *on-going support services*, and *faculty support*. While students varied in the extent of support received across the student groups, attendance of extensive orientation programs was unique to international students.

## **Extensive Orientation Programs**

New student programs are designed to help students successfully transition into the university environment, and gain a foundation for their adjustment to the university. While most colleges and universities provide new student orientations (Mesidor & Sly, 2015), there is not extensive literature on the programs designed to meet the unique needs of international and first-generation students (Andrade, 2006). Within the study, 18% (n=5) of the international students attended orientation programs specifically designed for international or first-generation students. These programs provided students with an opportunity for networking, and introduced them to university resources. For example, Nicole discussed the international student orientation at her university:

“My experience is very interesting, so I started with international student orientation.

Um, so we most, the international students come to campus before the Americans get here, and you sort of get to fraternize with everyone before. Everyone is open-minded, it’s very, you know out of their comfort zone, out of their country, miss their parents, and all of that. You know very interested in learning about other cultures, because they did leave theirs for here. I could say that, my international student friends are some of my best friends to this day...I mean I definitely loved the experience. Um, so yeah, you know it’s sort of played a huge part in the way the four years have gone, most of my friends have been international...”

Nicole’s university held an extensive orientation program for international students that began one week before the general orientation for domestic students. She revealed that the international focus helped students to develop bonds with one another, as the shared experience of moving to the U.S. brought everyone out of their comfort zone. The orientation program also encouraged

students to be open to different cultures, as it provided an avenue for students to engage in cultural exchange. She later discussed the impact of these cultural exchanges in making her less “conscious” of her color, and generating openness to the diversity of her environment. In doing so, she was able to increase her cultural capital, and later acclimate to her diverse university. Additionally, the impact of this orientation program on expanding Nicole’s social capital is demonstrated by the friendships she was able to maintain throughout her college career.

In addition to introducing students to the social and cultural realms of the university, orientation programs were also useful in helping students adjust to its academic facets. For example, two of the international students discussed participating in programs that catered to first-generation students. These programs presume students lack the college knowledge to navigate the higher education system, and therefore seek to foster this knowledge and/or introduce students to resources that enhance their academic capital. While Gale is not a first-generation college student, after her parents’ death she lived with her lower-middle class, non-college educated, family members. Thus, similar to the other immigrants in the study, her current family had little to no accumulation of academic capital. However, Gale discussed the role of her university’s orientation program in fostering this capital:

“The (University) program, that pre-freshman program was a miracle an answered prayer that I never knew I needed. But basically just having that support system at (University) CAP was super useful, we had to meet with our counselors every single week and that was just to report about you know how you were doing. Everyone that was a first generation student, whether from the U.S. Africa, or Europe you know they just felt the need to support you or check in on you. My counselor herself, she would encourage me to network with international students on campus, and you know try to get mentored, get

a tutor for things I found difficult. For example, the computer typing itself, um, yeah so that was really really helpful...”

The pre-freshman program at Gale’s university was a 10-week professional program that sought to further prepare first-generation students for the university environment. Gale expressed that through the program, she received consistent support and mentoring from a counselor.

Additionally, through the weekly meetings with this counselor, she was introduced to international student networks, and encouraged to utilize academic resources such as tutoring and mentoring upon the start of classes. This was beneficial, as her introduction to various university resources helped her to overcome academic barriers. For example, Gale mentioned having minimal exposure to technology, which left her unprepared to type all of her work.

However, upon discussing this concern with her pre-freshman counselor, she was referred to support services that she later utilized. Likewise, she outlined that her familiarity with the tutoring programs contributed to her strong academic performance. Therefore, through this program, she was able to acquire the academic capital that helped her circumvent barriers and successfully navigate her academic pathway.

While students revealed that their orientation programs helped in their academic, social, and cultural adjustment, the focus on one facet of the university experience was discussed as a setback to students’ adaptation. More specifically, Jenny divulged that her orientation program centered on helping students navigate the academic facet of the university, but neglected to address the social component. In reference to her orientation program she stated:

“...whatever orientation you go through is about school, school, school, which concentration, which subject, which classes, but no orientation about the real life experiences as an international student you know, which I feel is missing. So, school

work is good work to get oriented into, but even personal life, we need an orientation in the personal kind of life as people from outside, to help us make us face some of these challenges.”

Although Jenny attended an elite research university, similar to that of the other international students, her university’s orientation program centered primarily on helping students chose majors, courses, instructors, etc. While she later discussed the beneficial impact of this preparation in helping her to progress in her field, she felt unprepared for life outside of the classroom setting. As outlined in chapter 5, Jenny faced psychological distress due to her inability to adjust to her social environment. Unlike the other students, Jenny did not develop friendships in her orientation program, which may be explained by the lack of focus on social development. Thus, Jenny’s narrative further illustrates the role of these early orientation programs on students’ overall adjustment to the university.

**Comparison.** While none of the immigrant students attended a specialized or extensive orientation program to prepare them for their university, international students who did attend revealed the role these programs had on their university adjustment. Among the five international students who participated in these unique orientation programs, all of them attended private predominately white institutions. Therefore, as racial and cultural minorities, these programs surrounded them with similar peers that they were able to resonate and connect with. In doing so, students’ were able to develop peer networks as a foundation for emotional and social support.

Through these international orientations, students were introduced to various academic resources that propelled their academic adjustment. However, students did not discuss a monolithic experience, as the focus on academic adjustment left Jenny unprepared for the social components of the university. As one of two international students who came from a lower

socio-economic status, Jenny did not have experience with diverse groups prior to entering the U.S. Therefore, her need for an orientation to the social culture of the university may be heightened, as she may have been more susceptible to social difficulties.

### **Support Programs**

University services have been seen to help international students in their adaptation to the U.S. through the establishment of support services, focusing primarily on helping students in practical and academic matters (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Andrade, 2006; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004). Immigrant and international students utilized distinct services to aid in their academic adjustment. More specifically, immigrant students discussed their on-going involvement in academic programs designed to support first-generation students, while international students utilized drop-in services for support.

**Immigrant students.** Among the immigrant students, 40% (n=6) of the participants discussed on-going involvement in academic support programs. These programs provided participants with a support network that aided in their academic and social adjustment. For example, Gwen participated in two programs designed for first-generation students, which provided her with a sense of support. Gwen stated,

“I was part of the academic, called the academic success program, which welcomed first generation college students. In that sense I felt like I had a community who supported me, and you know different people that were coming in as first generation college students, so I had those connections...The McNair scholar I did research every summer, in that sense, I would go to another institution to do research and then they would pay me a summer stipend to do research. So that, those stipends were, I did research four years in a row. So



I was able to get stipends that helped pay for things you know as well, I was able to save up to pay for a few things, but I am deeply in debt because of my financial loans.”

Through her involvement in these programs, Gwen discussed being connected with other first-generation college students. Similar to the international students who participated in orientation programs, the connections that she was able to foster gave her a community of support.

Likewise, through her involvement in the McNair program she was provided with research opportunities, and a source of summer funding, which she revealed was vital as a low-income student. Therefore, these programs not only helped her to gain peer networks and academic experiences, but also provided a sense of financial capital that lessened her debt in the summer.

Zaid, another immigrant and first-generation college student, reported a similar experience with an academic support program. More specifically, Zaid discussed receiving academic support through a minority student program. She stated:

“I was part of a program called AAP, which I think was for first-generation minority students. This program was so helpful, so tutoring at (University) is super expensive, but luckily this program gave me access to free tutoring in whatever subject I wanted. It was group tutoring which was actually nice, because we got to help each other after the secession in case we missed anything. You even got a counselor that made sure you were on track with everything, so I would go to find out what credits I needed to graduate, the classes I had left to take.... We had a general counselor, but with this program you got an additional one, so the individual attention you get there is so much better, so I always went to her... so it really helped me do well academically”

Zaid was unable to afford tutoring at her university without the help of the AAP program.

Additionally, she discussed utilizing the counseling services within the program, despite having

an undergraduate counselor. She attributed this to the more individualized attention she was able to receive with AAP, which may be due to the counselor's smaller caseload. This counselor was vital in helping Zaid progress in her field, and staying on track to graduate. Therefore, this program gave Zaid access to academic resources, not feasible for her to access on her own, that helped her to adjust and progress in the academic sphere.

**International students.** While none of the international students were involved in an academic support program during their enrollment, one student used university resources to adjust to the standards and requirements of her academic environment. Jenny revealed having limited familiarity with certain course tasks, which led her to seek assistance from academic services. For example, she stated:

“...the library department that will help you with the literature search. They were all very welcoming, you go to them, make an appointment. Then you have a writing center, their work is to help you format your work, do the grammar, and all that. So that helped me a lot like to quickly adjust.”

Prior to migrating to the U.S., Jenny discussed not having any experience conducting literature searches, as the libraries in her home country were not well developed. However, her university library coordinated appointments, which allowed her to work one-on-one with a librarian to find the research she needed. Additionally, as one of the few international students who did not attend an elite private high school, she revealed having lackluster English writing and speaking skills. However, the writing center's tutoring services helped her adhere to the writing standards of her graduate program. Thus, through these campus services, Jenny was able to adjust to the requirements of her elite research university.

**Comparison.** While both immigrant and international students leaned on university services to aid in their adjustment, immigrant students discussed more specialized support through structured programs. Designed to address vulnerable populations, these programs sought to circumvent difficulties associated with academic realm, and provided early preparation for graduate coursework. While only one international student discussed using tutorial services, she shares a similar background with the immigrant students. As a lower income and first-generation college student, Jenny did not have the academic preparation of the other international students. Therefore, she used tutorial services to address specific issues. While the degree of support received by the students can be attributed to the extensiveness of the services, both were beneficial in helping to bridge the academic preparation gap for lower-income students.

### **Faculty**

Andrade (2008) suggests that faculty support and validation are essential for international students' university adjustment. This is substantiated by other research that has outlined the importance of student-faculty interactions on the intellectual and personal/social outcomes of college students (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh & Hu, 2001). Within the study, several of the immigrant and international participants reported expanding their social support networks to include faculty. More specifically, among international students, professors' understanding of international students' barriers set the stage for student-faculty engagement. However, across both groups, an interest in fostering development in a particular field garnered faculty support.

**International students.** Among international students, participants revealed that their status as international students encouraged their professors to reach out to them. For example, Jenny discussed the specialized attention her professor gave to her.

“The professors were I would say human, and they understand the, there is a big community of international students, so they understand those problems happen. So they help you feel, not fear to tell them in case you don’t understand something. Within the first month I was just reserved, and didn’t know what to do, but as we moved on, some professors would ask if you had. Like one of my professors would have set meetings one-on-one, so we had a steady go talk to him about your personal life, so it helps him understand you more outside the classroom environment. So you are able to tell him, this is happening in my life, so if you see me not participating, it’s not that I don’t understand. It’s somewhere in class, I’m trying to go through a lot, maybe my mind is away back home.”

In his study, Trice (2003) found that professors generally recognized the unique challenges international students face in comparison to domestic students. Similarly, Jenny revealed that because of the large international student population at her university, her professors were aware of the problems these students may face. In terms of her experience, Jenny divulged that she struggled in her adaptation to the U.S. university environment. Therefore, she was not actively engaged in the classroom, which encouraged her professor to meet with her on a consistent basis. Jenny would then discuss her personal and academic concerns in these meetings. This allowed her professor to have some insight on her classroom performance, while also providing Jenny with an opportunity to voice her concerns. Ergo, this engagement provided Jenny with a source of support.

Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas (2000) outlined that international students believe greater learning support from professors would be advantageous. Similar to Jenny, Daisy divulged how her university professor supported her learning.

“The few that I have been able to reach out to, have one been very very nice and very very understanding of the different circumstances that surround my learning compared to my peers. One thing that I’ve also noticed the conversations tend to be very inclined towards my you know my Africanness. You know they’ll give me examples of what they did when they were in Africa for a time, what I should do, if I was going to the city what I should look out for because it has an African context to it. Which is very kind in terms of them being sensitive to my identity...”

As an undergraduate student, Daisy discussed not being very connected to most of her professors. However, she mentioned one particular professor who she was able to develop a relationship with. Similar to Jenny’s narrative, Daisy’s professor understood the unique learning circumstances surrounding international students. Likewise, she revealed the familiarity her professor had with African culture. Therefore, in an attempt to support Daisy, he provided advice through the lens of her African cultural identity. In doing so, the professor was able to create a dialogue of shared understanding, while also being thoughtful of Daisy’s identity. Thus, the professor was able to develop a relationship of mutual respect with Daisy, thereby encouraging her to reach out to him for support.

**Shared experience.** In his study, Andrade (2006) found that professors who have identified the needs of international students were able to devise proper support. Similarly, within this study, two students discussed receiving faculty support to foster their development in a particular field. Therefore, students’ were able to establish bonds with faculty beyond the basis of students’ migration status, as professors worked with students to address a particular academic need. For example, Sammy, an international student, discussed his relationship with his engineering professor.

“The only professor that I got super close to was my dynamics professor...I really got interested in that, so I ended up doing an independent study with him on engines and stuff. So during that time we had a lot of one to one, I was like come with my findings, and we would meet two or three times a week and he would tell me. So during that one on one time we got to like, it was pretty cool, we got to know each other, and it opened my eyes to a lot of real world engineering experience.”

In a similar vein, Zaid, an immigrant student, discussed the role of her research advisor on her development.

“... I did have a good relationship with one professor, who I actually did research for too. We kinda actually initially bonded because I was an immigrant from Africa, and I think he was working on some diversity initiative that involved Africa... he was the one that really helped me excel in the field, because he exposed me to the research and theory early on, which not only fostered my interest, because I ended up getting my minor in Education, but it also helped me competitive for the graduate level...”

Both Sammy and Zaid expressed that their professors exposed them to a particular topic/ field, and encouraged their development in that area. While Zaid discussed the role of her African cultural identity in fostering that initial relationship, for Sammy his interest in the field is what led him to work more extensively with his professor. However, both students revealed that through on-going engagement and support they gained a great deal of knowledge and experience, which Zaid attributed to her current standing as a graduate student in her field. Thus, these findings illustrate the role professors have in nurturing academic adjustment through support in students’ academic fields.

**Comparison.** Among the international students, faculty sought to provide participants with unique support to aid in their academic adjustment. More specifically, students revealed that professors used their knowledge on the particular issues facing international students to provide them with individualized support. Likewise, in acknowledging their African identity, professors sought to create a sense of openness and respect in their interactions with students. While this was not seen among immigrant students, it may be because their immigrant identity was not decipherable. However, across immigrant and international students, two participants revealed the role of professors in fostering their academic development in a certain field. Therefore, students' migration status may influence their access to faculty support.

### **Cross Sectional Analysis**

University support services provided participants with the capital to help circumvent academic and socio-cultural barriers on campus, while also helping to mediate the negative impact of a lower-income background on students' adaptation. Differences in sources of support aligned with institutional type, as none of the students attending minority-serving institutions discussed the use of structural programs and/or services for their university adjustment. However, differences did arise among student groups.

International students discussed access to unique services, such as extensive orientations, that helped prepare them for their university environment. Those who attended the orientations revealed the usefulness of these programs in facilitating long-lasting support networks. Yet, the degree of support may also be a factor of students' background. While the majority of international students attended elite secondary schools and had prior exposure to the U.S., the one student that did not (Jenny) felt the international orientation did not prepare her for the non-

academic facets of the university. Thus, these orientations may not address the needs of lower-income international students.

The findings illustrate the ability of university resources to address the unique needs of certain sub-groups. More specifically, while immigrant students were enrolled in more extensive support programs, low-income international students also discussed using academic support programs to help address the gaps in their prior schooling. Even among faculty, a heightened awareness of international student barriers led professors to provide individualized support to students based on their migration status. Therefore, students' access to certain forms capital was a unique function of their socio-economic and migration status.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study make an important contribution to the discussion and understanding of *how* African migrant students cultivated the capacity to navigate and adjust to U.S. universities. Participants received support and guidance from several types of social agents and institutional resources, which gave them the confidence and information to overcome barriers to their socio-cultural and academic adjustment. The participants revealed that their access to social, cultural, and academic capital, specifically through their peers, family, and university resources, helped them to successfully navigate their university adjustment process.

#### **Peer Networks**

Within the study, students' primary barriers involved what Wang, Wei, Zhao, Chuang, and Li (2015) described as "cross-cultural loss," which involves the difficulty students experience adjusting to the loss of familiar relationships, educational systems, environments, etc. However, through peer networks (e.g. racially/culturally similar students and organizations) students were able to develop relationships based on the essence of a shared experience. For



international students, the common experience of cultural shedding and integration led them to seek support and guidance from other international students. Therefore, in line with research (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011), the majority of international students socialized primarily with other international students. However, immigrant students discussed co-nationals and racially similar groups as their primary networks of support.

Sherry, Thomas, and Chi (2010) demonstrated that “international students can feel a sense of community while abroad by connecting with other people from their own culture” (p.42). However, the findings reveal that characteristics beyond culture, such as a shared migration experience or racial identity, helped students to create communities of support on campus. Furthermore, the formation of these “pseudo” families worked to mediate the stresses of students’ university environments. Therefore, through the support and encouragement of their social networks, students acquired knowledge about their university systems, and gained the psychological wherewithal to overcome academic and social challenges. This aligns with the collectivist orientation of the African students, as these networks recreated the essence of communalism in African culture

### **University Resources**

Among immigrant and international students, participants also revealed how university resources provided them with the academic and social capital to navigate their university adjustment. More specifically, students who attended predominately white institutions discussed access to support programs and services that provided them with free counseling, mentoring, and tutoring. Likewise, students at these universities mentioned turning to faculty for support as they furthered their development within a specific field. Additionally, international students discussed turning to faculty for help in their cultural adjustment, as some professors had an awareness of

international student barriers.

Differences among student groups also surfaced according to program type. More specifically, international students discussed the vital role of extensive orientation programs and drop-in tutoring services, in helping them develop peer networks, address academic difficulties, and understand diverse cultures. Immigrant students on the other hand used on-going support services designed for first-generation college students. While the programs used by immigrant students only addressed the academic component of the university system, participants revealed the role it had in helping them navigate their academic pathway.

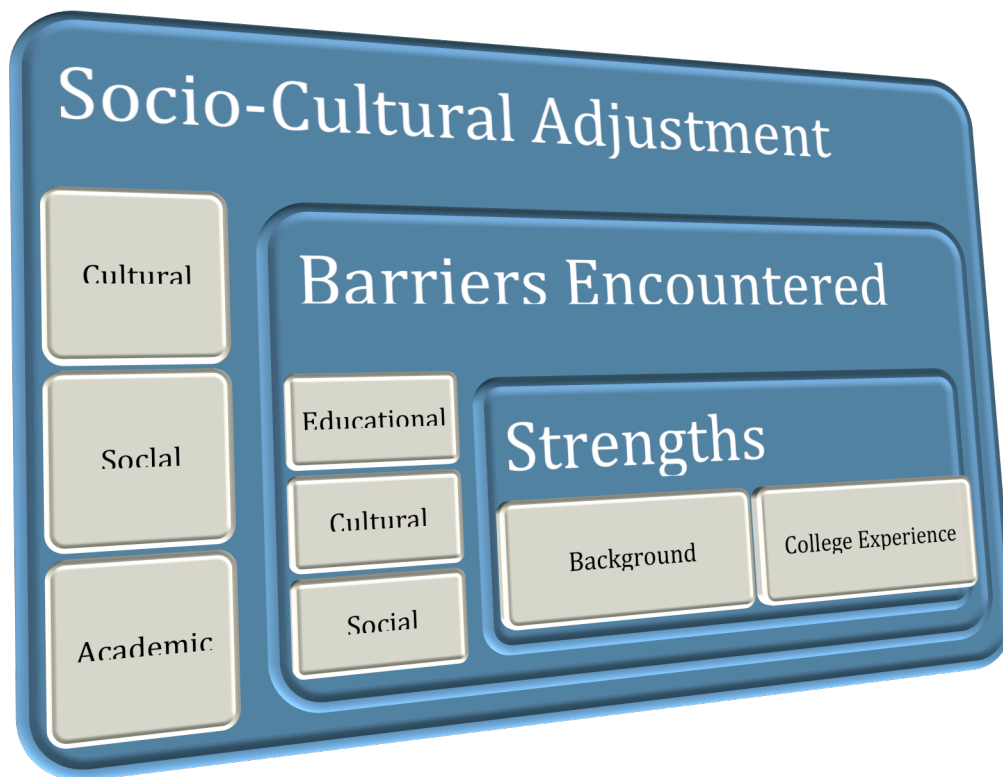
## **Conclusion**

There is a great deal of research that discusses the various personal and interpersonal factors that influence the social, cultural, academic, and psychological adjustment process of immigrant and international students (Mesidor & Sly, 2015; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, the findings in this study illustrate how the accumulation of capital from various relationships, resources, and support networks helped students to adjust and navigate their higher education pathway. The findings in this chapter expand the conceptual framework (Figure 4) by recognizing the role of university experiences, via support networks, on the students' socio-cultural and academic adjustment. Additionally, the study reveals how university resources can directly impact students' adjustment to their university.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion and Implications**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the lived experiences of African immigrant and international students in their socio-cultural adjustment to U.S. colleges and universities, inclusive of the barriers they encounter on U.S. campuses, and extend understanding of factors related to their college adjustment. For this study, I centered on how students revealed they navigated their university experience, which allowed me to examine the key influences and experiences that impacted their adaptation to their university environment. Therefore, I analyzed interviews from 28 African immigrant and international college students, using an interpretivist paradigm to learn about their socio-cultural adjustment. Guided by the conceptual model discussed earlier (Figure 4), findings from this qualitative study provided unique insight into how these African migrant students' backgrounds impacted their preparation for higher education in the U.S., the barriers they faced upon starting their post-secondary degree, and the factors that helped students overcome barriers and adapt to their institution.

**Figure 4. Conceptual Framework: African Migrant Socio-Cultural Adjustment**



In this final chapter, I first summarize and highlight the major findings from this study, examine the findings in relation to this guiding conceptual framework. Next, I present a new framework, which builds on additional insights from my findings. Finally, I discuss implications of my study on African migrant students for higher education practice and research. While I cannot generalize the findings to all African immigrant and international college students, I can use my findings to discuss critical issues that are relevant for higher education researchers and practitioners seeking to better understand and support this unique segment of the growing immigrant student population in the USA and beyond.

#### **Pre-migration Context Matters in Students' Adjustment Process**

Building on related literature and the guiding conceptual framework, my findings further support the importance of cultural background in the socio-cultural adjustment of African

migrant students in U.S. colleges and universities. As discussed in the earlier sections, Yasso's (2005) conception of community cultural wealth recognizes the knowledge and strengths that students of color bring with them to the university setting. Within this study, this concept of cultural capital captures the synergy of students' pre-migration context to help understand the socio-cultural adjustment process for African migrant students to U.S. universities. Studies have demonstrated differential cultural adaptation outcomes across those from different heritage cultures (Shwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010; Berry, 1997; Padilla, 1980; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010); however, heritage culture is typically conflated with country of origin. However, in addition to explicating important aspects of students' heritage culture, this study also expanded the scope of pre-migration context relevant to students' preparation for their adjustment to U.S. universities. More specifically, the students' narratives illuminated the potential influence of the African students' socio-economic, cultural, and academic backgrounds on their university experiences. Furthermore, the findings illuminate how students' backgrounds provided them with a source of cultural capital to foster their university adjustment.

### **Socio-Economic Status Created a Foundation for U.S. Higher Education**

Findings from this study revealed that students' pre-migration context was associated with their preparation for the cultural, academic, and social integration into the U.S. post-secondary system. The varying degrees of preparation among the students highlight the need to understand the important determinants that influence students' ability to adapt. However, existing cultural adaptation research neglects to account for individual factors related to dispositions to acclimate to the host culture. Yet, the students' discussions of their predispositions to adjust to higher education in the U.S. illuminates the overarching influence of their socio-economic background.

Among both the African immigrant and international students, participants revealed that their families were their primary motivators to attend higher education in the U.S, and helped to facilitate their adjustment. This aligns with literature that recognizes the role of the black family in fostering resiliency in Black children and demonstrates the role of black family structures in facilitating educational success (Jayakumar, Vue, Allen, 2013). However, differences in parental support aligned with variations in the students' socio-economic status. The international students in the sample reported a higher economic status, parental education level, and parental occupations in the business and professional sectors. The importance of socio-economic factors was exemplified in the initial familial decisions to study abroad. Among the majority of international students, parents instilled an early commitment to study in the west, which was heightened for nearly half of those who already had older siblings or parents with foreign degrees. Therefore, among the international students, parents used their socio-economic resources to create a sense of familial knowledge on western education, thereby preparing students for college in the U.S.

This majority of international students also discussed having prior exposure to the U.S., including its cultural and academic environments. For example, several international students mentioned traveling to the U.S. and interacting with diverse groups prior to their study-abroad experience. Likewise, the majority of the international students attended private schools with a western-based curriculum. This led the way for students to experience less of a culture shock upon migration. The association between socio-economic status and culture shock among international students was especially salient in Jenny's narrative. One of two international students who came from a lower-middle class background, Jenny discussed how her upbringing left her unprepared for the culture shock she experienced upon migrating. Ergo, higher socio-

economic status equipped the majority of international students with access to certain forms of social and cultural capital, which helped facilitate their cultural adjustment.

The majority of the immigrant students in the sample were first-generation college students, who came from what they classified as lower to middle income households. Therefore, unlike the international students, they lacked the academic or cultural exposure to the west that may have prepared them for their migration. While some of the immigrant students attended high school in the U.S, they still had difficulty adapting to the American culture upon starting college. Some attributed this to their relatively homogenous environment even upon entering the U.S., as they discussed interacting primarily with culturally similar groups. Thus, there was a lack of comfort and/or familiarity with American cultural practices, social customs, and western academic settings.

The association between socio-economic status and familial decision-making also resonated among immigrant students, as coming from a lower-income household prompted parents to push their students toward a post-secondary degree as a means of financial stability. Likewise, the harsh conditions of the labor field further propelled both parents and students to view education as a vehicle for economic mobility. However, unlike the international students, the majority of the immigrant students did not have the familial socio-economic resources to equip them with the academic or cultural capital to support their university adjustment. This familial push towards educational uplift serves as a form of what Yasso (2005) refers to as aspirational capital, as lower-income immigrants were able to maintain their hopes for higher education despite the barriers of their socio-economic status. These findings align with Gándara 's (1995) work on Chicana/o experiences, in which she found a culture of possibility “that would break the links between parents’ current occupational status and their children’s future academic

attainment” (p.55).

### **Impact of Prior Schooling**

High school cultural and structural arrangements have been seen to “influence college-going aspirations, choices, and educational attainment” (Jayakumar, Vue, Allen, 2013, p.554). The findings also illustrate the role students’ prior academic experiences had on their preparation for college in the U.S. These findings are consistent with past research by House (2000) and others that demonstrated a positive association between prior academic performance and academic success among international students in U.S universities. However, the participants in this study expanded the scope of prior schooling by identifying the role of high school type on academic adjustment. Again the influence of socio-economic status reemerged, as nearly every international student discussed being familiarized with a western-based curriculum and a rigorous academic environment. Furthermore, students who attended these private schools were the only participants to express minimal academic difficulties their freshman year. Conversely, immigrant students mentioned high school deficiencies in their home country, in the form of a lack of resources and instructor expertise. Despite this, immigrant students did describe schooling in their home country as very rigorous, especially in comparison to their U.S high schools. These findings provide an explanation for the previously seen association between increased education in students’ home country and higher college G.P.A (Bosher and Rowekamp, 1998). In that, the majority of lower-income immigrant students attended under-resourced high schools in the U.S. that did not provide the same level of college preparation as the international students who attended elite private schools in their home country. This may also be indicative of a differing school cultures, as culture “influences how society is organized, how school curriculum is developed and how pedagogy and policy are implemented”(Yosso,



2005, p. 75). Therefore, the students' schools in their home country may have had a more rigorous and competitive culture that fostered their preparation for the U.S. post-secondary environment.

Students' prior schooling also played a role in preparing them for their social and cultural adjustment to the U.S. While the majority of immigrant students had some high school experiences in the U.S., they did not discuss their learning environment as diverse. This may be associated with the fact that the majority attended high schools with a predominately Black or Latino student body. However, international students were exposed to multi-cultural learning environments, which included a diverse faculty, student body, and school programs such as "culture day." Participants recognized the role this had on their cultural adjustment to the U.S., as they discussed their diverse high school experiences as a contributing factor against feelings of culture shock in college. Likewise, international students mentioned attending schools with "open-minded" students, which led to increased levels of inter-cultural exchange. Therefore, similar to international travel, participants' high school experience provided another avenue towards exposure to diversity and multiculturalism.

### **Heritage Culture**

Similar to other cross-cultural research on non-Western populations, both immigrant and international students discussed a collectivist orientation as a vital aspect of their heritage culture (e.g. Berry, 1997, 1998; Berry & Sam, 1997; Leong & Ward, 2006; Sam & Berry, 2010). A communal orientation transcended social class and length of time in the U.S. More specifically, immigrant students with more lived experience in the U.S., and international students with heightened exposure to the west, discussed dissociation with the individualistic aspects of American culture. However, some differences in cultural adoption did arise in relation to

students' migration status. Immigrant students who have been in the U.S. for over five years described their culture as a blend between their host and heritage culture. Yet, despite the degree of western culture exposure, the majority of international students did not discuss adopting American cultural values. With the degree of similarity between host and heritage culture associated with cultural adjustment, students who described their culture in terms of a bi-cultural orientation may face less difficulty adapting to the culture of their university environment (e.g. Berry, 1998; Leong & Ward, 2006; Sam & Berry, 2010).

While the majority of students were fluent in English prior to migrating to the U.S., some immigrant students mentioned taking ESL courses while in high school and/or having language difficulties upon entering college. However, this was only prevalent among immigrant students from countries in which English is not a national language. These students divulged the negative impact of language difficulties on their university experiences. However, the majority of international students attended elite private schools that provided them with a heightened degree of English proficiency despite their country of origin. Yet, some international students discussed being nervous to speak English upon entering college in the U.S. Therefore, while there was variation in English language proficiency and fluency across groups, international students from elite private schools discussed minimal difficulty with comprehension prior to entering college.

### **Relation to Framework**

As illustrated in the conceptual framework (Figure 4), personal predispositions (i.e. background) also play an important role on migrants' adjustment process, as differences in adaptation exist "even among individuals who have the same cultural origin and who live in the same acculturative arena" (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 473). This resonated with the variation seen in participants' perceptions of push-pull factors towards their socio-cultural and academic

adjustment. More specifically, students' socio-economic status was associated with their exposure to the U.S., familiarity with diverse interactions, level of academic preparation for college in the U.S., and the type of familial influence on students' post-secondary decisions. These primary aspects of background provided students with a degree of preparation for their overall adjustment. Ergo, students with a higher socio-economic status (the majority of international students) were better equipped to adapt to college in the U.S. However, as outlined in the prior sections, individual variation still permeated across groups. Students' narratives revealed that their familial and school communities provided them with a sense of cultural capital that also fostered their socio-cultural adjustment. The students' narratives aligned with Jayakumar, Vue, and Allen's (2003) community affirmative model of college-going that "is more conducive to the advancement of Black students and other students from of color from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds" (p.572). Therefore, this analysis sheds light on the relationship between African students' upbringing and their preparation for college in the U.S., which is tied to family resources, pre-college academic preparation, and desire for attaining a sense of global competency and financial security. Furthermore, the findings reveal the positive role and agency of the African community in fostering educational success.

### **University Experiences: Facing Barriers to Adjustment**

In the examination of students' university experiences, this study also provided insight into the barriers participants' faced in their cultural, social, and academic adjustment to American universities. More specifically, the transitions in the students' cultural environment, academic atmosphere, and social interactions, reflected the unique avenues through which students faced barriers to their adaptation. In doing so, this study demonstrated how cultural

differences, at both the individual and institutional level, could translate into varying behavioral responses or choices among African immigrant and international students.

### **Cultural Dissonance**

The findings in this study illustrate that divergences in the cultural values of African immigrant and international students from those of their university environment, often led to a series of barriers in the students' cultural integration and overall adjustment. More specifically, students discussed a strong sense of religiousness and a collectivist orientation as the main cultural values that created barriers to their adaptation. While a great deal of similarities permeated across both groups, the impact of students' backgrounds surfaced, as differences in their discussions of cultural barriers were linked to their degree of preparation for various aspects of the university environment.

While nearly every student mentioned religion as a core aspect of their culture, religious conflicts occurred primarily among international students. Only one immigrant student mentioned the secular university environment as a major barrier; however, this may be explained by the fact that immigrants' increased exposure to a secular western environment provided some preparation for their university experience. For example, Blake expressed being far less religious since moving to the U.S. nearly a decade ago. However, as newer migrants, the majority of international students came from a conservative background, in which their faith was deeply entrenched. This contrasted with the students' university culture, which many revealed was synonymous with promiscuity and heavy drinking. This difference left students feeling pressured to assimilate to the secular nature of the university, and act in a way that did not align with their values. While only one student succumbed to this pressure, it led to a great deal of psychological and physical distress. The majority of international students discussed complete rejection of

these practices. Yet, in rejecting these aspects of the university culture, international students also expressed dissociation with the broader university environment. Therefore, within the study “religion seems to play a significant role in the construction, preservation, or abandoning either of local and ethnic/national identities or of transnational and global ones” (Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007, p.178). As such, international students’ strong sense of religiousness led them toward heritage cultural maintenance, while immigrants increased exposure to western secularism may have prepared them to adopt this cultural value system.

Across both international and immigrant student groups, a strong orientation towards collectivism led students to feel a great deal of culture shock during their university experience. Similar to Franklin’s (2002) conception of cultural capital, students had a “sense of group consciousness and collective identity... aimed at the advancement of an entire group” (p. 177). Both immigrant and international students discussed how the communal nature of their heritage culture left them unprepared to address the individualistic aspect of their universities. Even among immigrants who have been in the U.S. for over a decade, participants expressed difficulty adapting to the “self-serving” aspects of their university environment. Therefore, across both groups, there was an unmet expectation that a support system would be in place to help students navigate the academic and cultural facets of the university. However, differences across student groups did surface, as international students in their earlier years discussed heightened difficulty with the isolation of a non-communal culture. More specifically, international students in their first and second years were the only students to reveal extreme psychological distress with the absence of a communal culture, while immigrants and international students further in their degree vocalized coming to terms with the individualistic orientation of their university

environment. Therefore, the psychological impact of the differing cultural orientations may lessen with increased presence in the U.S.

### **Issues of Academic Misalignment**

Study findings also provide further insight into the association between prior schooling and adjustment to the academic culture of the university. Within the study, international students did not discuss difficulty adjusting to the academic rigor of their universities. Furthermore, among undergraduate students, international students revealed that their early math and science courses resembled their high school courses. This may be explained by the fact that nearly every international student (except for one) attended a rigorous private high school. This high school preparation theme was very different in the narratives of immigrant students, who revealed that rigor was the biggest barrier to their academic adjustment. Despite excelling in high school, immigrant students discussed a mismatch between their high school and college performance. This may be attributed to students' high school environment, as the majority of immigrant students attended lower resourced public schools both in their home country and the U.S. Ergo, immigrant students' secondary experiences may not have adequately prepared them for the rigor of the university environment.

Unique to the international students narratives, were difficulties associated with a lack of background knowledge on classroom content. More specifically, a few of the international students revealed that a lack of knowledge on American policies and/or history inhibited them from participating in class discussions. For example, Jenny revealed that her unfamiliarity with state policies left her feeling confused in some of her graduate social work courses, and unaware of the applicability of the content in her home country. Even at the undergraduate level, students mentioned being left out of discussions on novels typically assigned in American high schools.

Therefore, while international students were prepared for the rigor, a lack of knowledge on domestically relevant material led to participation and comprehension barriers in the classroom.

Despite students' differing academic backgrounds, both immigrant and international students faced difficulties with language. While the majority of students vocalized being proficient in English before starting college in the U.S., they were unfamiliar with American English. More specifically, all the students discussed being taught in British English before coming to the U.S. While immigrants who migrated before high school did not mention difficulties with language, the other students had similar problems adjusting to the American accent and vernacular. More specifically, these students had difficulty understanding American speech, and withdrew from classroom participation due to differing dialects. Thus, students with less secondary exposure in the U.S. expressed a shared difficulty with language.

### **Perceived Prejudice**

Findings from this study also support prior cross-cultural research which has found that individuals can only integrate successfully into the local culture when, "the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity" (Berry, 2005, p. 705). Furthermore, "students of color are more likely to succeed in environments in which they feel validated and where striving for success does not require them to undermine their own cultural or racial history and values (Jayakumar, Vue, Allen, 2013, p. 555). However, within the study, students' discussed perceived prejudice as a major barrier to their adjustment process. While experiences with discrimination resonated across both groups, those who attended predominately white institutions expressed the negative implications of racial tensions on campus, and heightened difficulty with the racial and cultural stereotypes. Therefore, across both immigrant and international groups, students shared feelings of psychological distress due to

misconceptions about their racial and/or cultural identity. More specifically, students revealed that their race, accent, and African culture led both professors and students to form negative judgments about their academic ability and question their place at the university. Similar to Jayakumar's et.al (2013) findings, some students used the negative stereotypes as motivation to work hard and succeed, while others discussed refraining from classroom engagement for fear of ridicule.

The findings reveal that difficulties with discrimination may have been heightened for international students, as they also struggled with new conceptualizations of their race. Prior to entering their university, several international students vocalized never thinking about their race, or conceptualizing their identity outside of their ethnicity. Therefore, upon entering the U.S. they had difficulty understanding their place as both a minority and a black student on campus. In addition to the internal struggle to understand their race, some international students also discussed intra-racial tensions between foreign and native-born blacks. Despite sharing the same race, cultural differences created ethnic divides, as some international students expressed an inability to form ties with native-born blacks. This was exacerbated during times of heightened racial tensions on campus, as these students revealed that native-born black students confused their lack of understanding for apathy.

### **Relation to Framework**

The conceptual framework guiding this study (Figure 4) demonstrates a direct association between barriers encountered and adjustment. The findings support this expected relationship, as students' were met with cultural, academic, and social barriers during their college experiences that impacted their university adjustment. This included cultural-value conflicts with the university culture, unfamiliarity with the norms and expectations of the academic environment,



and experiences with prejudice, which then led to socio-cultural, academic, and psychological difficulties. However, the findings also reveal the impact of students' past experiences on the association between college experiences and adjustment, extending the framework to reveal how students' backgrounds may either exacerbate or mediate barriers.

### **Academic and Social Capital: Strengths-Based Tools to Overcoming Barriers**

Consistent with the growing literature on academic capital, this study found that access to multiple forms of capital was instrumental in supporting and encouraging students' adjustment process, and overcoming barriers to their cultural and social adaptation. Specifically, this study uncovered that various social networks and university support resources helped to shape and influence African migrant students' adaptation.

### **Developing Networks: Strengths-Based Themes**

Social capital refers to “networks of relationships that can help students manage an unfamiliar environment by providing them with relevant information, guidance, and emotional support” (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015, p.235). Among African immigrant and international students, participants' sources of social capital on campus stemmed primarily from racially/culturally similar peers and student organizations. In cross-cultural terms, African immigrant students relied primarily on emic (culturally-specific) over etic (university or general) networks in their adaptation and acculturation into U.S. higher education (e.g. Berry, 1997; 2005; Berry & Sam, 1997; Bowman, 2013). Therefore, in the socio-cultural adjustment process, students in this study most often mobilized African-centered networks rather than either taking mono-cultural assimilation or bi-cultural strategies. African students in this study discussed turning to these culturally specific groups for guidance on how to navigate the academic components of the university. In developing these emic or African-centered networks, students

revealed how they were able to mitigate feelings of culture shock and avoid marginalization. Similar to Jayakumar, Vue, and Allen's (2013) findings of the YBS program, these racially similar peer groups helped students to leverage and develop navigational capital in their socio-cultural adjustment. Therefore, these African-centered groups and networks were major resources in the adaptation process, which promoted students' successful socio-cultural adjustment.

Going beyond the traditional acculturation literature, findings that African immigrant students primarily rely on culturally specific sources of social capital and support also highlight the importance of strengths-based themes. Consistent with strengths-based literature, findings revealed that these culturally specific groups provided students with a strong supportive community as well as several sources of informal support during times of stress (e.g. Bowman, 2006; 2013; Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013; Smith, 2013; Yasso, 2005). At the community level, these findings are consistent with the growing community cultural wealth literature showing how both Latino/a and African American students draw on several sources of cultural strengths as they struggled with the unfamiliar culture of their university (Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013; Yasso, 2005). At the personal level, these findings are also consistent with a growing strengths-based literature showing how students of color as well as immigrant students mobilize multilevel cultural strengths to enable more adaptive coping, resiliency, and successful outcomes (e.g. Bowman, 2006; 2013; Smith).

Both African immigrant and international students relied primarily on emic sources of social and cultural capital. However, differences did arise between African immigrant and international students in their sources of support. More specifically, immigrants' primary social networks consisted of co-nationals and racially similar groups, while international students

discussed the shared experience of migration led them to lean on other international students as they adapted to their environment. Therefore, in line with research, the majority of international students socialized primarily with other international students (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Additionally, a few of the international students had access to pre-formulated networks through a familial presence on campus and administrative liaisons. As discussed in chapters 4 and 5, African immigrant and international students had an orientation towards communalism. Therefore, the students' ability to develop communities of support aligns with the collectivist nature of their African heritage culture. Thus, these networks helped students to maintain their collectivist value system as they adapted to their university environment.

### **University Resources**

Despite their primary reliance on culture-specific (emic) support systems, both African immigrant and international students also utilized a wide range of more general (etic) university resources available to all students. When discussing cultural capital, Bourdieu (1986) defines it as the accumulation and transmission of knowledge across generations. However, beyond familial knowledge, cultural capital includes resources and networks that provide students with knowledge on how to navigate the college process. This aligns with the study, as immigrant and international students discussed the role of university resources in supporting their adjustment to their universities.

Among international students, participants revealed the vital role of extensive orientation programs on setting the stage for their academic, cultural, and social adjustment. More specifically, these orientations introduced students to their initial peer networks, diverse cultures, and academic services. This introduction to the university helped to mediate feelings of culture shock, and circumvent barriers to students' adaptation. However, the academic focus of certain

orientations was discussed as a setback, as one student expressed feeling unprepared for the social culture of the university. Therefore, while these orientations helped students navigate their academic pathway, they did not prime every student towards social adjustment.

Through the formation of academic capital, students develop navigational skills that allow them to progress in higher education systems (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011). International and low-income students discussed unique sources of support in their formation of academic capital. Some of the international students mentioned having culturally responsive professors who actively sought to address issues related to their cultural and academic adjustment. More specifically, these students had professors who were aware of the unique challenges facing international students, and worked with them one on one to discuss students' concerns and help in their course progression. However, among lower-income students, participants were more likely to utilize academic support services to navigate their academic pathway, and bridge the gap between their academic preparation and current schooling. More specifically, some of the immigrant students enrolled in support programs designed to provide additional support for first-generation and low-income students. Similarly, Jenny, the only international student without a private school background, discussed using drop-in services to address her academic barriers. Therefore, structured developmental programs and services helped to mediate the impact of deficiencies in students' prior schooling.

### **Toward a New Conceptual Framework**

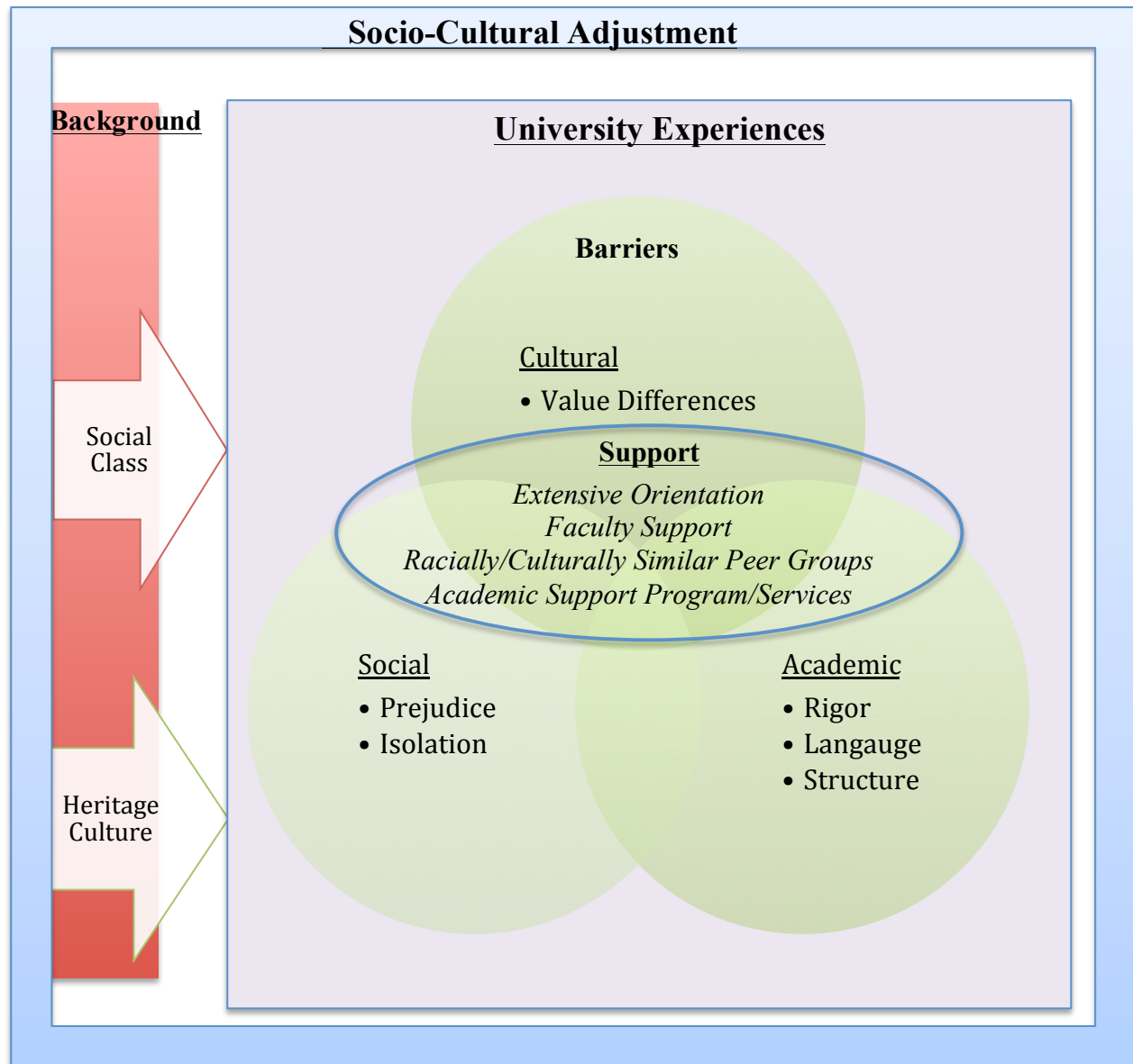
The findings in this study go beyond the guiding conceptual framework, which was based on a review of past cross-cultural literature relevant to immigrant and international students discussed in Chapter 4. New insights from the present study provide a foundation to expand the initial conceptual framework to better illustrate how university experiences can encourage the

accumulation of capital, thereby helping students to overcome the social, academic, and psychological barriers to their adaptation. Likewise, the findings demonstrate how students' university experiences can help to mediate the influence of background on their adjustment. More specifically, through supportive networks and resources students can help to mitigate the impact of poor academic preparation, limited host culture exposure, and unfamiliarity with cross-cultural interactions on their university adjustment.

### **Synthesis: Framework for Understanding African Student Socio-Cultural Adjustment**

The findings from this study examine the socio-cultural adjustment process of African immigrant and international students to U.S. universities. After a careful analysis of the findings, I tried to illustrate the relationship among the emergent themes, so as to demonstrate the adjustment process of African migrant college students, with a concentration on their background and university experiences. To achieve this, I constructed a framework of the process discovered in this study, which is presented in Figure 7 below. In order to construct this framework, I revisited the conceptual framework presented in chapter 2 (see Figure 4). The initial conceptual framework accounted for the theoretical foundations of acculturation, capital formation, integration, a strengths-based approach, and the literature on immigrant and international student adjustment. The framework presented in this chapter is an evolution of Figure 4, which accounted for the findings in this study, and attempts to illustrate the adjustment process of African migrant students.

**Figure 7. Socio-Cultural Adjustment Process of African Migrant Students**



The results in this study demonstrate that students' adjustment to their universities did not occur in a vacuum, but instead was associated with students' backgrounds and university experiences. First, the left side of the figure represents the two factors identified as important facets of students' background, which influenced the students' preparation for college in the U.S. These were: heritage cultural values and socio-economic status. Specifically, these factors were

instrumental in providing students with academic and cultural capital, which impacted students' decisions to pursue higher education in the U.S, and their preparation for the U.S. post-secondary experience. While the findings illustrated an association between socio-economic status and prior schooling, heritage cultural values were found to have an independent influence on culture shock and adjustment. Therefore, some students were better prepared for their adjustment because they came from environments that exposed them to western culture and curriculum. The findings also demonstrated a direct association between students' background and their university experiences. Familial background has demonstrated a powerful effect on educational outcomes, with parental investments (e.g. financial resources) having an important mediating effect on this association (Freese & Powwell, 1999; Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007). Similarly, a higher socio-economic status mediated the relationship between prior schooling and academic difficulties on campus. Therefore, pre-migration context was instrumental in creating a foundation for students' adjustment to their universities.

Once students entered their university environment, they faced barriers associated with poor preparation for the cultural and academic facets of the university, and/or social barriers (e.g. discrimination, ethnic tensions, etc.). As illustrated in Figure 7, students experienced cultural, social, and academic barriers that included cultural value differences, difficulties with language, experiences with prejudice, etc. These barriers are reflected as overlapping circles because they do not operate separately or in isolation from one another in the students' adjustment process. Cultural value differences include areas such as religiousness and collectivism, which impacted students' adjustment to western culture and their socialization with host nationals. For example, a strong sense of religiousness caused some students to reject the secular nature of their university culture, leading them to feelings of isolation and marginalization. These cultural

conflicts were heightened in the narratives of international students, especially among those with less lived experience in the U.S. Academic barriers had a direct impact on students' academic adjustment. While students vocalized shared difficulties with language and classroom structure, group differences with rigor were associated with prior academic preparation. These difficulties inhibited classroom participation and content comprehension. Prejudice specifically relates to factors such as stereotyping and perceived discrimination. This impacts students' adjustment, given that the majority of students reported feeling marginalized due to their race or African origin. Therefore, barriers within these three spheres hindered students' socio-cultural adjustment process.

Encompassed within university experiences, are supportive networks and resources that assist in providing students with the guidance and knowledge to facilitate their cultural adjustment. Students discussed access to cultural, academic, and social capital from four primary sources: extensive orientations, racially/culturally similar groups, faculty, and academic support programs/services. These sources introduced students to the culture of the university, helped them to navigate their academic pathway, and provided them with a support system during times of psychological distress. Therefore, while the university experience created barriers to students' adjustment, it also provided support to facilitate it. Thus, university experiences encompass both barriers and support, which are reflected as overlapping circles because they operate alongside one another in the association between university experiences and socio-cultural adjustment. Together, this framework demonstrates the process of African migrant students' socio-cultural adjustment into U.S. universities, and how pre-migration context and university experiences are related to that process.



## **Implications for Practice**

Based on what I have learned about African immigrant and international socio-cultural adjustment, I offer suggestions for colleges working with African migrant students.

### **Cross-Cultural Training**

This study illustrates the need for institutions to be aware of the unique barriers that African immigrant and international students may face in their college adjustment. While literature on African migrant student adjustment is minimal, some studies have demonstrated that African students experience heightened acculturative stress compared to other groups (Manyika 2001; Poyrazli & Lopez 2007). Therefore, this study further illuminates the presence of culture-specific barriers to adjustment.

In examining the experiences of African immigrant and international students, the study illustrates how the process of cultural adoption and shedding may create difficulties for these students, even decades after moving to the U.S. For example, both immigrant and international students discussed barriers adapting to a non-communal culture, and feelings of marginalization as a result. These adjustment difficulties were exacerbated by racial tensions on campus, especially among international students who also struggled to understand their racial identity. Therefore, the university should work to develop strategies for an open campus culture, with an inclusive attitude towards cultural diversity. This can include the development of social events to bridge the cultural gap among the different student cultural groups. Likewise, institutions could develop courses or workshops that focus on cross-cultural issues

The study also saw that an awareness of international student barriers among faculty prompted professors to establish supportive relationships with students. Some international students also discussed the facilitation of support networks by university administrators. This

highlights the need for faculty and administration to understand the challenges faced by migrant students, and how they can assist them. The lack of faculty and administrative support received by immigrant students is concerning, and may also demonstrate the need for universities to extend support to immigrant students, as they also undergo a process of cultural adjustment.

### **Development of Support Programs**

Implications from this study suggest that extensive pre-freshman orientations should be developed specifically for immigrant and international students to help them adapt to the cultural and academic expectations of the university. While the students' adjustment difficulties resonate with other students, particularly first-generation college students, this study illustrates that cultural differences between students' heritage and host culture play a substantial role in their overall adjustment. Therefore, orientation programs should be designed to introduce students to the university culture, help them form cross-cultural friendships, understand the expectations of university professors, and guide students to support services that can address their academic and psychological needs.

Throughout their university experience, consistent efforts should be made to help migrant students' in their adaptation to the host culture. The findings in this study illustrate how parental resources can help to mediate feelings of culture shock, through avenues such as international exposure. However, through cross-cultural training and comprehensive attempts to create interactions with host nationals, students can enhance their cross-cultural communication and understanding. Additionally, educational programs that increase intercultural understanding may also support students' cultural adjustment and mediate feelings of culture shock. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for language support to address issues with American dialect and English comprehension. Therefore, in addition to ESL courses, supplementary language

workshops and/or language tutoring will help students' English fluency and proficiency.

### **Encouraging Counseling Utilization**

Among international students, counseling resources have been seen to aid in persistence, stress management, and university adjustment (Pedersen, 1991). However, researchers' have recognized the underutilization of counseling services among international students, creating a call for preemptive steps to aid the socio-cultural adjustment process of African migrant students and thwart stress (Mori, 2000; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004). Therefore, in line with Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey (2005), this study calls for universities to develop and advertise informal outreach programs and workshops to de-stigmatize counseling and mental health services. In facilitating group counseling services, students may also develop relationships with other students going through similar adjustment problems, thereby increasing their supportive networks.

### **Diversity Policy: From Assimilation to Multicultural Pluralism and Empowerment**

In addition to suggestions for programs, findings in this study also have implications for innovative diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in higher education. Findings in this study strongly support the virtues of diversity policies in higher education for African immigrant students that support multicultural pluralism and ethnic empowerment strategies over traditional assimilation strategies (e.g. Berry, 1997; Bowman & Betancur, 2010). As suggested in the review of related literature, mono-cultural assimilation policies promote programs and strategies that require the relinquishing of one's heritage culture to identify solely with the host culture. In contrast, multicultural pluralism policies would support African students' tendencies to adopt aspects from the host culture without rejecting their heritage identity. This study's findings are consistent with past acculturation research that clearly rejects diversity, equity, and inclusion

policies for African and other immigrant students in higher education that promote mono-cultural assimilation (Berry, 1997; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; LaFromboise & Rowe, 1983).

Berry (1997) identified a society's diversity policies as one of four moderating factors that impact the likelihood of assimilation or alternative acculturation processes: (a) the nature of the larger society, (b) the type of acculturation group, (c) demographic and social characteristics of the individual, and (d) psychological characteristics of the individual (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Moke, 1987; Berry, 1994; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). The host society's policies and attitudes towards diversity may vary from acceptance of cultural diversity to high pressure for assimilation towards a uniform cultural standard. Consistent with Bowman and Betancur (2010), strengths-based findings in this study on the importance of heritage culture in the successful social-cultural adjustment of African immigrant students strongly support higher education diversity policies that move away from mono-cultural assimilation to multi-cultural pluralism and ethnic empowerment strategies. Similar to Berry (1997), findings support the benefits of diverse ethnic empowerment policies that facilitate the retention of heritage culture for international and immigrant students, as well as refugees, native people, and other U.S. racial/ethnic groups. In this study, the retention of heritage culture had an adaptive value for both international students as sojourners who seek U.S. higher education to return to their countries of origin, and immigrants who seek higher education to reside permanently in the U.S.

### **Future Directions for Research**

Despite this study's contributions to an increased understanding of African migrant students' socio-cultural adjustment, there are suggestions for future studies that I would recommend based upon what I learned in my research. As I discussed earlier in chapters 3 and 7,

the study was limited in its sample size and composition. While differences were seen according to migration status (i.e. international vs. immigrant) and social class, cultural differences may have been more apparent with a more diverse student population. For example, I found and identified a nationality difference in terms of language difficulty, as students from countries in which English was not a national language had lower levels of English proficiency. However, future studies could contribute to our understanding of African students' socio-cultural adjustment process by specifically studying a larger and more proportional sample of African students. For example, future studies may focus on the examination of university experiences by nationality, ethnic group, or tribal affiliation. This is especially important given the cultural variations of African students both within and across African countries.

In addition to the ethnic composition of the sample, future studies should aim to examine African students at different types of institutions. I found differential experiences with campus climate among those who attended predominately white vs. minority-serving institutions. Likewise, I found that a secular institutional culture was associated with increased levels of stress among some international students. Therefore, an examination of African migrant students at religious institutions, two-year community colleges, historically black institutions, etc. may bring additional insight into the role of institutional climate on students' socio-cultural adjustment.

Future studies employing longitudinal designs are also needed to understand each stage of students' transitions into their universities. More specifically, studies that follow students over the course of their university career would be able to examine at what points students' faced the most critical barriers to their adjustment. Likewise, longitudinal studies will also illustrate what support services are most critical at various stages in students' university adjustment. This

perspective is missing from research, as it may show over time what is more informative for interventions.

Lastly, while this study used acculturation theory as a lens to understand cultural adaptation, this study demonstrates the importance of using additional cultural frameworks to examine the socio-cultural adjustment of migrant students. Kuh (2001) recognizes the role of culture in shaping students' university experiences. However, acculturation theory neglects to account for the multifaceted ways students' heritage culture can facilitate or hinder university adjustment. Therefore, alternate cultural frameworks may illuminate the implicit influences on students' cultural and social adjustment.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Sample Recruitment E-mail**

#### **Sample Recruitment Letter or Email**

Dear [*insert name*],

My name is Feven Girmay and I am a doctoral candidate at the Center for Higher and Post-secondary Education at the University of Michigan. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the acculturative and adjustment experiences of African migrant (i.e. African international and African immigrant) students. You are eligible to be in this study because of your ethnic identity and current educational status. I obtained your contact information from you prospective university's student organization website.

If you decide to participate in this study, I would like to audio record our interview. However, after the interview is transcribed the audio will be destroyed, and I will use the information throughout the course of my study.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. Therefore, you can choose to opt-out of the study at any time. If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or phone me at

702-430-0154 or fmgirmay@umich.edu

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely, Feven Girmay

## **Appendix B: Invitation to Participate**

### Invitation to Participate in Study

Dear student:

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the acculturation and adjustment of African immigrant and international college students. The study is being conducted for a dissertation in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, at the University of Michigan School of Education.

All students who participate in this study will be a part of one interview that should last between one to one and a half hours.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary, there is no compensation provided for participation.

Information provided during this study will be kept completely confidential.

Please see the attached consent form for a more detailed explanation of how your information will be kept private. We will discuss the consent form at the first interview, and you will have the opportunity to ask questions about it.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the attached demographic form and the consent form and return them to:

**Feven Girmay Center for the Study of Higher and Post-Secondary Education XXX School of Education Building XXX E. University Ave Ann Arbor, MI XXXXX-XXXX**

If you have any questions about this study, you may e-mail me at xxxxxxxx@umich.edu or call me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely, Feven Girmay, Doctoral Candidate Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education University of Michigan School of Education



## **Appendix C: Consent Form**

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study** **ACCULTURATION OF AFRICAN MIGRANT STUDENTS** **University of Michigan**

**Principal Investigator: Feven Girmay**

**Faculty Advisor: Phillip Bowman, Ph.D. Higher Education, University of Michigan**

**Edward St. John, Ph.D. Higher Education, University of Michigan**

#### **Overview and Purpose:**

Feven Girmay invites you to participate in a research study about your decision to attend and current experiences at your university/college. The purpose of this study is to learn about African international/immigrant students' socio-emotional process of adaptation and the impact it has on their academic success and identity formation.

If you agree to be part of the research study, I will ask you a series of questions. There will be one one-on-one discussion that will take about 60-90 minutes, and will be audiotaped. After the conclusion of the interview, I may contact you in the future for clarification on your interview, or to ensure I am accurately interpreting your responses. Audio recording is required for participation in the study.

At the conclusion of the interview, the audio recording will be transferred into a secure password-protected laptop, and be deleted from the recording device. The interview will be transcribed, after which the audio recording will be destroyed/deleted from the laptop. After I transcribe the interview, I will read the interview and redact any personal or identifying information. The transcripts will remain on the secure laptop to be coded and analyzed, without any identifying information. Any notes taken during the interview or transcription process will not contain any identifying information.

#### **Benefits**

Although you may not directly benefit from being in this study, your responses may help those in academe to better understand aspects of student adjustment, leadership, and diversity.

#### **Risks and discomforts**

I have taken steps to minimize the risks of this study. Even so, you may still experience some risks related to your participation, even when I am careful to avoid them. These risks may include a feeling of un-comfort in answering some of the questions, as you may wish to not answer some of the questions. I have been trained to work with you, through my previous work experience doing qualitative interviews, and a course I have taken at the University of Michigan on qualitative research. Therefore, I will stop the interview any time you request.

## **Confidentiality**

I plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you. There are some reasons why people other than me may need to see information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly, including the University of Michigan.

To keep your information safe, I will keep the audiotapes of the interview in a locked box until I write a copy of the discussion. After writing it up, the tapes will be destroyed. I will enter the information onto a computer that is password-protected. I will use special coding to protect the information. Your real name will not be used.

## **Voluntary nature of the study**

Being in this study is completely up to you. Even if you say yes, you can stop the interview at any time. You may also choose to not answer a question for any reason.

## **Contact information**

If you have questions about this research, you may contact me, Feven Girmay University of Michigan, 610 E. University Ave, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, [fmgirmay@umich.edu](mailto:fmgirmay@umich.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than me, please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, 540 E Liberty St., Ste 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 936-0933, or toll free, (866) 936-0933, [irbhsbs@umich.edu](mailto:irbhsbs@umich.edu)

## **Consent/ Permission**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that your questions you have about the study have been answered, and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact me if you think of a question later.

*I agree to participate in the study.*

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Printed Name

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Signature

Date

## **Appendix D: Protocol**

### **Interview Guide: African Migrant College Students**

**Intro:** Hello my name is Feven Girmay I would like to thank you again for taking time to participate in this study as part of my dissertation research. This study is on African immigrant and international college students, focusing on your adjustment to U.S. universities. I will be audio recording this interview, however all the information you share will not be connected to your identity and there will not be any repercussions for your participation. The information will be used for both learning and reporting purposes. Therefore, I will be publishing some of the findings, however your identity will remain confidential. If at anytime you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions feel free to let me know and we can skip over them Do you have any questions for me before we start? If you have any questions during the interview, don't hesitate to ask.

#### **Background**

For this section, I will ask you a few questions about your background. Can you tell me about where you grew up and your experience there?

1. Can you tell me about your family background?
2. What are your parents' educational backgrounds?
3. What are your parents' occupations?
4. When did you and your family come to this country?
5. Can you tell me the story of how you chose to come to your prospective university?
6. Did you make any college visits, before choosing your perspective university?
7. Have you traveled to the U.S. or internationally before?
8. What does your family think about you being a student here at the University of X?

Okay, for this section in this section I will focus on your high school experience, trying to understand your academic background.

9. Can you please describe your high school and your experience there?
10. Can you tell me, how 'well' did your high school prepare you for college?
11. Were you involved in any programs during the summer or after high school that prepared you for college?
12. Did you have academic or other social experiences that provided you with an opportunity to have an understanding of the United States, including its culture and educational system prior to coming to the United States?

#### **College Experience**

So For this section, I will ask you a few questions about your college experience.

13. What motivated you or prompted you to further your education in the United States?
14. What year are you in your college education?
15. What is your major?
16. Can you tell me about your experience when you first started college?
17. Where there any difficulties or problems you faced upon starting college?
  - a. If so, can you talk about them

- b. Where did you get help? Institutional/family/peers?
- 18. Describe your specific experiences in the U.S. higher educational system including:
  - a. language
  - b. learning styles- classroom participation, independent learning, homework, critical thinking skills, course assignments
  - c. interaction with professors
- 19. What do you feel was the most difficult part of the transition into college in the U.S?
- 20. How would you describe your university experience now?

### **Campus Climate**

For this section, I will ask you a few questions about campus climate.

- 21. When people first meet you what race/ethnicity do they think you are?
- 22. What race/ethnicity do you identify as?
- 23. How has that changed since coming to the U.S, if at all?
- 24. Have you had any campus experiences that have influenced your views on your race or ethnicity?
- 25. How do you feel the university/ other students view people of your race/ethnicity?
- 26. As an international/immigrant student, how do you think other traditional students perceived you? Or related to you?
- 27. What groups do you find yourself interacting with the most?
- 28. How did you develop these social interactions?
- 29. Describe the kinds of activities that you find yourself doing the most.
- 30. How close/connected do you feel you are to the University community?
  - a. Involvement with the university environment

### **Cultural Transitions**

For this section, I will ask you a few questions about cultural experience.

- 31. How would you describe your culture?
- 32. Are there moments during your college experience when you reflect back on your culture?
  - a. Family, traditions, religion
- 33. How do you feel your culture aligns or does not align with the university culture?
- 34. Do you feel that you've had to alter or change some of your values to adjust with the university climate?
  - a. If so can you give me some examples, and explain why you feel you have to do that.
- 35. What cultural adjustment problems did you face in your socialization experience with other American students?
- 36. Are there moments in which the culture of the university has caused you stress or discomfort, if so can you explain?
- 37. Looking back, is there anything you wish you had known before coming to college that would have helped in your transition?

### **Closing**

38. What are your plans upon graduation?
39. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix E: Detailed Student Demographics

**Table 6. Detailed Student Demographics**

	Pseudonym	Immigrant/ International Status	Country of Origin	Years in America	Year in College	College Major
1	David	International	Ethiopia	4	4 <sup>th</sup>	Agricultural business management
2	Danny	International	Mali	5	5 <sup>th</sup>	Computer/ Electrical Engineering
3	Nicole	International	Ghana	4	4 <sup>th</sup>	Science Technology and International Affairs
4	Abraham	International	Kenya	4	4 <sup>th</sup>	Economics
5	Nate	Immigrant	Ethiopia	6	5 <sup>th</sup>	Social psychology
6	Jenny	International	Uganda	1	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters	Masters of Social Work
7	Kane	Immigrant	Cameroon	5	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mechanical Engineering
8	Kali	International	Ethiopia	1	1 <sup>st</sup>	Business
9	Gwen	Immigrant	Ghana	15	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters	Masters in Public Health and Social Works
10	Daisy	International	Rwanda	2	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Finance
11	Saba	Immigrant	Ethiopia	14	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Masters	Masters in Public Health and Public Policy
12	Simon	International	Ethiopia	6	1 <sup>st</sup> year Masters	Masters in Engineering Management
13	Lacy	Immigrant	Ethiopia	7	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Business and Hospitality Management
14	Kay	Immigrant	Mali	8	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Women's Studies
15	Solomon	Immigrant	Ethiopia	4	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Health Sciences
16	Rachael	International	Nigeria	2	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Italian
17	Fabeha	Immigrant	Eritrea	10	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Ph.D.	African Studies
18	Amina	Immigrant	Somali	16	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters	Secondary Education
19	Zaid	Immigrant	Sudan	15	5 <sup>th</sup> year Ph.D.	Higher Education
20	Jay	Immigrant	Ethiopia	6	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Public Health
21	Bill	Immigrant	Ethiopia	4	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Civil Engineering
22	Oscar	International	Nigeria	6	1 <sup>st</sup> year Ph.D.	Mechanical Engineering
23	Don	Immigrant	Sudan	21	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Architecture
24	Gale	International	Kenya	6	Graduated-1 year	Science Technology and Propriety
25	Anthony	International	Nigeria	1	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Ph.D.	Biology
26	Tom	International	Zimbabwe	5	Graduated-1 year	Economics
27	Blake	Immigrant	Nigeria	14	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters	Nursing
28	Kate	Immigrant	Ethiopia	15	Graduated-1 year	Public Health Masters

**Table 7. Detailed Student Socio-Economic Characteristics**

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Immigrant/ International Status</b>	<b>Student Classified Income</b>	<b>Highest Degree Earned by parent(s)</b>	<b>Parental Occupation Sector</b>
1	David	International	Upper class	Doctorate (Russia)	Father: Businessman Mother: Housewife
2	Danny	International	Upper class	Masters (home country)	Father: U.N Diplomat Mother: Housewife
3	Nicole	International	Upper class	Masters (U.K)	Father: Civil Engineer Mother: Fashion Designer
4	Abraham	International	Upper class	High School (home country)	Father: Businessman Mother: Housewife
5	Nate	Immigrant	Lower Middle class	Bachelors (home country)	Father: N/A Mother: Labor
6	Jenny	International	Lower Middle Class	No formal education	N/A
7	Kane	Immigrant	Middle class	High School (home country)	Father: Businessman Mother: Housewife
8	Kali	International	Upper class	Doctorate (Russia)	Father: Business Mother: Housewife
9	Gwen	Immigrant	Lower Middle class	Technical School (home country)	Father: Labor Mother: Labor
10	Daisy	International	Middle class	Bachelors (home country)	Father: Director general for a mining company Mother: Housewife
11	Saba	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High School (home country)	Father: Property manager Mother: Housewife
12	Simon	International	Upper class	Doctorate (America)	Father: United Nations Researcher Mother: Store owner
13	Lacy	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High School (home country)	Father: Security Mother: Casino employee
14	Kay	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High School (home country)	Father: Iron worker Mother: Labor
15	Solomon	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	Bachelors (home country)	Father: Cab driver Mother: N/A
16	Rachael	International	Upper class	Bachelors (home country)	Father: United Nations Mother: Central Bank
17	Fabeha	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High School (home country)	Father: Pastor Mother: Housewife
18	Amina	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	Masters (Home Country)	Father: Sales Mother: Housewife
19	Zaid	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High School (Home Country)	Father: Janitor Mother: Janitor
20	Jay	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	No High School (Home Country)	Father: Businessman Mother: housewife
21	Bill	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High School (Home Country)	Father: Truck Driver Mother: housewife
22	Oscar	International	Upper class	Masters (home country)	Father: Civil Engineering Mother: Health Practitioner
23	Don	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High School (Home Country)	Father: Taxi Driver Mother: Kitchen worker
24	Gale	International	Lower Middle Class	Bachelors (Cambridge)	Father: Banker Mother: Accountant

**Table 7. Study Participant Socio-Economic Characteristics Continued**

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Immigrant/ International Status</b>	<b>Student Classified Income</b>	<b>Highest Degree Earned by parent(s)</b>	<b>Parental Occupation Sector</b>
25	Anthony	International	Middle Class	High School (home country)	Father: Elementary teacher Mother: house-wife
26	Tom	International	Middle Class	Masters (home country)	Father: University Lecturer Mother: General Manager at Pharmacy
27	Blake	Immigrant	Middle Class	Masters (U.S.A)	Father: Business man Mother: Managerial position
28	Kate	Immigrant	Lower Middle Class	High school (Home Country)	Father: Bar Porter Mother: House Keeper



**Table 8. Detailed Participant Education Characteristics**

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Immigrant/ International Status</b>	<b>First Generation College Student</b>	<b>Private/ Public High School</b>	<b>Type of High School System</b>	<b>First person to study in the West</b>	<b>Institution type</b>
1	David	International	No	Private	Ethiopian	No	PWI-Public
2	Danny	International	No	Private	French System	Yes	PWI-Public
3	Nicole	International	No	Private	British	No	PWI-Private
P	Abraham	International	Yes	Private	British	Yes	PWI-Public
5	Nate	Immigrant	No	Public	Ethiopian/ American	Yes	PWI-Public
6	Jenny	International	Yes	Public	Ugandan	Yes	PWI-Private
7	Kane	Immigrant	No	Private	Technical school	Yes	PWI-Public
8	Kali	International	Yes	Private	Ethiopian	No	PWI-Public
9	Gwen	Immigrant	Yes	Public	Ghanaian/ American	Yes	PWI-Public
10	Daisy	International	No	Private	American	Yes	PWI-Private
11	Saba	Immigrant	No	Public	Ethiopian/ American	Yes	PWI-Public
12	Simon	International	No	Private	British	No	PWI-Public
13	Lacy	Immigrant	Yes	Public	Ethiopian/ American	Yes	MSI-Public
14	Kay	Immigrant	Yes	Public	Mali/ American	Yes	MSI-Public
15	Solomon	Immigrant	No	Public	Ethiopian/ American	Yes	MSI-Public
16	Rachael	International	No	Public	American	No	PWI-Public
17	Fabeha	Immigrant	Yes	Public	American	Yes	PWI-Public
18	Amina	Immigrant	No	Public	American	Yes	PWI-Private
19	Zaid	Immigrant	Yes	Public	American	Yes	PWI-Public
20	Jay	Immigrant	Yes	Public	Ethiopian/ American	Yes	MSI-Public
21	Bill	Immigrant	Yes	Public	Ethiopian	Yes	MSI-Public
22	Oscar	International	No	Private	Turkish	Yes	PWI-Private
23	Don	Immigrant	Yes	Public	American	Yes	MSI-Public
24	Gale	International	No	Public Boarding	British	No	PWI-Private
25	Anthony	International	No	Public Boarding	British	Yes	PWI-Private
26	Tom	International	No	Private	British	Yes	PWI-Private
27	Blake	Immigrant	No	Public	American	No	PWI-Private
28	Kate	Immigrant	Yes	Public	American	Yes	PWI-Public

**Table 9. Detailed Participant Religious Characteristics**

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Immigrant/ International Status</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Religion</b>
1	David	International	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
2	Danny	International	Mali	-Moral Non-religious
3	Nicole	International	Ghana	Christian
4	Abraham	International	Kenya	Muslim
5	Nate	Immigrant	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
6	Jenny	International	Uganda	N/A
7	Kane	Immigrant	Cameroon	N/A
8	Kali	International	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
9	Gwen	Immigrant	Ghana	Christian
10	Daisy	International	Rwanda	Christian
11	Saba	Immigrant	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
12	Simon	International	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
13	Lacy	Immigrant	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
14	Kay	Immigrant	Mali	N/A
15	Solomon	Immigrant	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
16	Rachael	International	Nigeria	Christian
17	Fabeha	Immigrant	Eritrea	Christian
18	Amina	Immigrant	Somali	Muslim
19	Zaid	Immigrant	Sudan	Orthodox Christian
20	Jay	Immigrant	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
21	Bill	Immigrant	Ethiopia	Orthodox Christian
22	Oscar	International	Nigeria	N/A
23	Don	Immigrant	Sudan	Orthodox Christian
24	Grace	International	Kenya	Christian
25	Anthony	International	Nigeria	Muslim
26	Tom	International	Kenya	Christian
27	Black	Immigrant	Nigeria	Muslim
28	Kate	Immigrant	Ethiopia	Christian

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